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JUNE

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TNT FOR TWO

by Bruno Fischer

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10-STORY DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

ALL STAR
ALL DIFFERENT

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Cover by Ernest Chiriacca

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TNT for Two

By Bruno Fischer

Those little red lobsters had a secret significance to Eben Hunt's criminal past. When the gunman met them again, they were the key to a suicide setup menacing his present. A menace which Eben could meet only by threatening his future with sudden self-inflicted doom.

CHAPTER I



Eben Hunt grunted, turned, and went out to the hall.

The mail lay piled on the long hall table. There was a letter for him in a long plain envelope, and the handwriting was a school teacher's dream. Eben knew that the letter was from Walt Rome before he got the envelope open.

Walt should have a good handwriting—he was so good at imitating everybody else's that he could select the best for his own. That talent had landed him in the state penitentiary for the second time. Walt wrote that he would be out next month and wanted Eben to meet him.

The street door opened. Eben shoved the letter into a pocket and turned to look at Dorothy Gibson's greeting smile.

"Hello," he said. "There's a package for you."

"A package? I didn't order anything. Who would send me—" She moved to the table and frowned down at the tiny package. It was about three inches long and two inches wide. "It looks like jewelry," she mused as she started to tear off the paper.

"From a boy friend?" he asked, trying to make his voice bantering.

"There's no man I know well enough in Coast City," she muttered.

E BEN'S chest lightened. She had moved into Mrs. Redden's boarding house two weeks ago, and she had always

THE LAND-LADY handed the little man a matronly smile along with the rent receipt. "You're a good roomer, Mr. Hunt," she told him. "Always prompt with your rent and never a complaint out of you."

had a smile for him. She was a slip of a girl, the right size for him, with a pale wistful beauty. There was a touch of weariness in her smile, a cloud of sadness covering the sparkle in her black eyes. He had an idea that she was lonely as he was. For days now he had tried to work up the courage to do something about it.

The wrapper was off the package. She held a little red box in her hand. She turned it in her fingers.

"How about having dinner with me?" Eben blurted.

Her dark eyes tilted up from the red box. There was no response in them, no expression. A flush of resentment spread up Eben's pinched cheeks. He had never been any good with women. He was too small, too insignificant, now perhaps too old, though he was still this side of forty.

"Dinner?" she echoed dully and looked down at the box. Automatically her fingers lifted the cover.

A little red celluloid lobster lay inside—a child's toy.

Outside, the street was noisy with traffic and children, but the sudden stifling silence in the hall seemed divorced from the world. For a breathless moment the little man and the slight woman stood staring down at the red lobster.

Then Eben Hunt found his voice. "Who sent you that?"

Dorothy Gibson didn't seem to hear him. Mechanically she dropped the box and the lobster into her handbag, snapped the bag shut, and went to the street door.

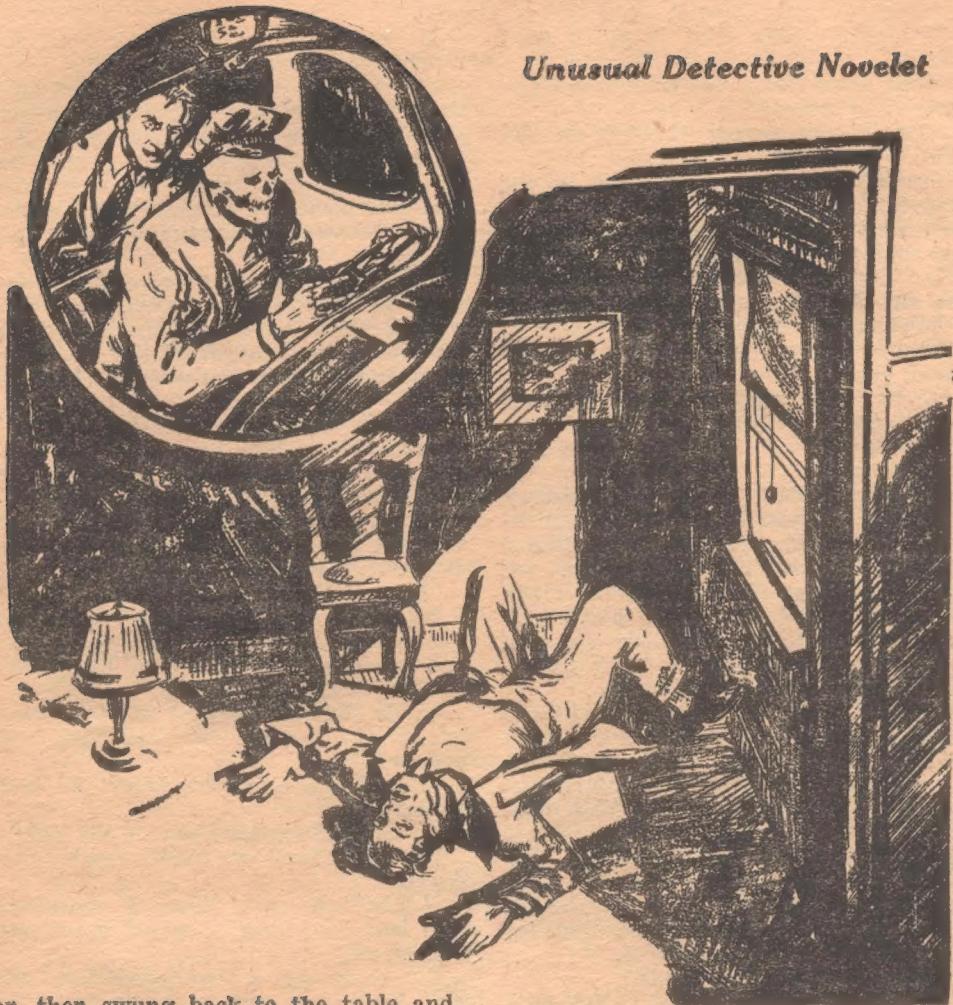
"Wait!" Eben touched her arm. "That lobster—does it mean anything?"

Her black eyes were on him, but they weren't looking at him. They didn't see him or anything in the hall. Her face was as static as a mask.

"Can't you answer me?" he asked. "I asked—"

She opened the door. He started after

Unusual Detective Novelet



her, then swung back to the table and picked up the brown paper in which the red box had been wrapped. There was no return address. Dorothy Gibson's name and address were crudely lettered in capitals. The way somebody would write who did not want his handwriting identified.

Dorothy Gibson was halfway down the street when Eben went down the steps. He closed the distance between them to twenty feet and then matched his pace with hers. There was nothing about the weary, stooped carriage of her back to tell him anything. She had always struck him as being tired.

She crossed two streets, then turned into the turbulence of Division Avenue. The sidewalk was crowded with early evening shoppers. At the Palace Theater a long line of people waited for the box office to open. He saw Dorothy Gibson slip through the center of the line. He was following when a heavy hand fell on his narrow shoulder.

"You got a nerve!" a beefy man roared. "You get to the end of the line."

"I only want to get through," Eben explained.

"Yeah! You think because you're little I won't sock you one? Scram!"

Argument would only waste time. Eben pulled away from the man's grip, raced back and around the line. By the time he was in the clear, Dorothy Gibson was no longer in sight. He hurried to the corner and looked down both streets.

Like the rankest amateur, he had lost her.

DOROTHY GIBSON trilled laughter into the telephone mouthpiece. "Are you surprised, Dan?"

"Gratified," Dan Daly said at the other end of the wire. "I'll be even more gratified if you'll come up to my place for a cocktail. My wife is out of town."

"I couldn't, Dan. But if you'll meet me—"

"Well, small favors are something. You mean right away?"

"Yes. At the corner of Division and Third."

She hung up and stepped out of the drug-store booth. Idly she glanced at the cosmetic display, then stopped at the next counter to buy a pack of cigarettes.

Dan Daly was already at the corner. The swanky apartment house in which he lived was on the next block.

"You're lovely," he greeted her. "Had dinner yet?"

"Later," she said and took his arm and hugged it to her. "Let's walk."

"Where to?"

"You'll see."

As they walked slowly in intimacy down a side street, Dan Daly kept beaming down at her. He had a face like a buzz-saw and was thirty years older, yet she seemed to go for him. All the other women in his life, especially his frigid, sour wife, had seen in him only a chance for easy money. But this quiet, decent girl had made no demands on him.

As yet. And decent? Daly scowled down at her hat. He had known her only a week and had seen her only twice in that time—and she had picked him up in a restaurant. Later he had considered that pick-up odd. He had learned that there was nothing brazen or forward about her. She made no demands; wasn't even playing him for a dinner tonight. Maybe she liked him. He almost believed that because his vanity wanted him to.

"Why so silent?" he asked.

She smiled up at him, and he felt mild shock. They were approaching a street lamp which highlighted her face. There was no warmth in her smile; only a kind of vagueness, an impersonal remoteness excluding him.

"Here we are," she said.

Dan Daly looked about in surprise. He hadn't paid much attention to where they were walking. He found that they were within a block of the waterfront. Across the street an abandoned warehouse stood moldering. On this side a parking lot had been given up when cars ceased coming to the warehouse.

"Here?" Daly echoed. "Did you come to show me something?"

"Yes."

She turned off the sidewalk toward the clapboard shack which had been the parking lot watchman's shelter. Moving at her side, Daly looked down at her, but he was too tall and could see nothing but her hat. Besides, they were getting beyond range of the street light.

He said, "If you'll tell me what you want in this ungodly place—"

She dropped his arm and pushed open the door of the shack. Over her shoulder she tossed him a coquettish smile. The periphery of the street lamp caught her delicate face and showed him that there was now plenty of warmth in her smile. Then she stepped through the door into darkness.

Daly remained where he was, breathing hard, wondering what in the world this was all about. Last week she had picked him up in a restaurant. If she wanted to be alone with him, that was fine. But this place!

"Aren't you coming in, Dan, darling?" she called.

No, it couldn't be what he imagined. The place was impossible. Robbery? No, not that sweet girl. She could get more than the few dollars he had in his pocket merely by asking.

"Darling?" her voice said.

He moved forward. It was the *darling* that did it. He went as far as the door and screwed up his face. The shack smelled gaggingly of rot.

Dimly the light reached in and showed her shadow against one wall. Her back was to him.

"For Pete's sake, Dorothy!" he said. "What—"

"Wait, darling, till I put on the light."

Her white hand was visible reaching up the wall.

"Light?" he said. "Even if the shack ever had electricity, it would have been turned off."

But there was a toggle-switch on the wall. As he got used to the darkness, he saw it and saw her finger touch it. He started to go to her as her finger clicked the switch.

The shack dissolved in chaos.

EBEN HUNT slipped through the police cordon by mingling with a group of newspapermen who swept down the street. Powerful police lanterns illuminated the one-time parking lot. Where the watchman's shack had been, there was now only a broad, shallow hole.

The reporters stopped at a canvas-covered hump in the gutter.

"That's the guy," a Homicide Squad sergeant told them. "Was blown clean over here by the blast!"

"How about giving us a look at him?" a reporter said.

"You wouldn't want to, pal," the sergeant said. "It don't sit good on the stomach. But there was enough left to identify him. I mean, there was still some clothes on what was left and a wallet in a pocket. He's Dan Daly."

"Not the real estate broker?"

The reporters scribbled feverishly on scraps of paper.

"Yup," the sergeant said. "That Dan Daly. Don't know what he was doing here at this hour, especially with a girl."

"Girl?" Pencils paused in midair.

"Yup," the sergeant said. "She really got it. No identity so far. They're picking up the pieces in a basket."

Eben turned away. In the lot two men were carrying a large wicker basket between them. They moved slowly, watching the ground, and they wore rubber gloves. Eben went toward them.

"Over there, Ed," one of the men said.

The man named Ed stooped. For a long moment he stood looking at the white arm he had picked up.

"Young girl," Ed said. "Nice hand. Arm cut off clean like with an ax. Funny thing explosions."

Eben leaned forward from his hips, staring at the small square diamond ring on the middle finger. It was Dorothy Gibson's. He was sure of it, because he always noticed jewelry.

His stomach was sickeningly empty as he turned back to the street. This was the girl he had thought of while lying in bed at night. Now all that was left of her was an arm, a hand, and a ring. This was the girl he had asked only a few hours ago to have dinner with him, and who might have accepted if she hadn't received a little celluloid lobster.

The toy lobster—why should it have had such startling effect on her? For eighteen years a lobster had been a lingering joke, a drunken schoolboy gag. How could there be any connection?

He stuck a cigarette into his mouth and tried to bring a lighted match to it. His hand shook. He was angrier than he had ever been in his life.

POLICE INSPECTOR SWICK had joined the reporters on the sidewalk. Eben moved to the fringe of the group to hear what was said.

"We know the woman wasn't Daly's wife," Swick was saying, "because we got in touch with Mrs. Daly by phone. She's visiting her mother."

"Daly never went anywhere with his wife," a reporter put in. "He had a string of dames." The reporter scowled at the hole where the shack had been. "But why would a guy like that bring a girl to this dump? And how'd the shack blow up?"

"TNT." Swick's small eyes in pouchy sockets came to rest on Eben. He frowned. "The bomb squad found traces of it. What a way to murder! I figure the killer had a wire connected to the TNT and stood off

at the other end of the lot where he could see Daly and the woman enter the shack. Then he let go."

The reporters' pencils flew. One asked, "Any idea of the motive, Inspector?"

"Maybe jealousy. We know how Daly ran around with other women. His wife told me plenty over the phone. Maybe a boy friend of one of Daly's women—" Swick's eyes swung back to Eben. "What paper you work for? I'm speaking to you, the little guy there."

Eben forced himself to grin. "I was passing by. The cops didn't stop me."

"They didn't, eh?" Swick brushed through reporters and glowered down at Eben. Suddenly his arm shot out; his big hand bunched Eben's jacket lapels. "You're Eben Hunt."

Eben said angrily, "Take your paws off me."

"Look who's getting tough. Didn't I tell you five years ago to get out of Coast City and stay out?" Swick tossed a happy chuckle at the reporters. "I think we got the case solved, boys. This is Eben Hunt, con-man and gunman, and he's on the scene of the crime."

Eben said nothing. He was too angry for words.

"Hell, Inspector," Morgan of the *Coast City Courier* said, "I knew Eben Hunt. He had a mustache and looked sort of—" Morgan peered into Eben's face. "Well, maybe. A man changes. What about his fingerprints?"

"On file but we don't need 'em. Watch this."

Swick released Eben and grabbed his left arm. He pushed up Eben's jacket sleeve.

Eben started to bring up his free fist. He checked himself. Trembling with rage, he stood small and insignificant while Swick pushed up the shirt sleeve.

On the underside of his forearm a small lobster was tattooed. It was a precise reproduction of the celluloid lobster which Dorothy Gibson had received in the mail.

CHAPTER II

IN THE morning Eben Hunt was released. They worked on him for a couple of hours in the basement, but he was hardened to that. He knew that there was not a scrap of evidence against him. He was getting the business only because of his reputation.

Then he was confronted with Dan Daly's wife, a rather attractive young woman who might have been beautiful if she had permitted the sourness to leave her mouth and eyes. She said she had

never before seen him; as far as she knew, neither had her husband.

And toward morning the bomb squad experts decided that maybe it wasn't murder after all.

Inspector Swick was frank with Eben. "They found a short length of wire, one end attached to an ordinary toggle-switch, the other end to a detonator. The whole thing intact, including the slab of board in which the switch sat. The board came from the shack. The wire between the switch and the detonator isn't more than ten feet long. So how could the killer have set off the charge of TNT without getting hurt?"

"Of course," Eben said. "Suicide."

"Maybe," Swick grunted. "It's not proof, but it makes sense. A suicide pact. But that's not why I'm letting you go." Swick massaged his jowls. "I can't see you pulling such a job, then hanging around an hour later. You'd use one of those little guns of yours and then beat it. And you wouldn't kill a woman."

Swick reflected. "At least I don't think you would."

"In other words," Eben said with quiet mockery, "you've decided that you haven't enough to hold me on."

When he got out, Eben bought a morning paper and read it over a hearty breakfast. There was nothing in the paper he didn't know except that the woman was still unidentified. Her handbag had been found. There had been nothing in it except a few dollars and a broken bit of red celluloid. No name. No scrap of writing.

When he returned to his rooming house, he sought out Mrs. Riggen, the landlady.

"Is Dorothy Gibson in her room?" he asked, choking a little as he said the name.

"You know, I don't think she slept here last night," Mrs. Riggen told him. "When I went up a little while ago to clean her room, I found her bed still made." She clucked her tongue. "I hope there's nothing wrong. Such a nice, quiet girl."

"Maybe she went home," Eben suggested.

"All the way to Chicago? Her bags are still upstairs," Mrs. Riggen sighed. "She shouldn't be running around, staying out all night. She had a nervous breakdown in Chicago, you know."

"I didn't know."

"Seems it was because of an unsuccessful love affair. The doctor told her to get away from Chicago, because everywhere she went in the city it made her think of the man who threw her over. Imagine anybody breaking the heart of a nice girl like that! Anyway, she came to Coast City two weeks ago. She was kind of looking around for a job and at the same

time getting treatments from Dr. Finch."

Eben's cigarette froze inches from his mouth. "Dr. August Finch?"

"That's the one. He's a very famous nerve specialist. Do you know him?"

"We went to college together," Eben said.

He went upstairs to shower and shave. In his room, he stood for a long minute looking at the tattooed lobster on his arm. His thin mouth was as crooked as if molded that way. Thoughtfully, he dressed.

Out of a secret compartment in his bag he took a small revolver, a shoulder-holster, and a box of cartridges. He got into the holster and snapped quick shots at various objects in the room with the empty gun. The familiar feel of it came back to him.

The revolver was only a Smith & Wesson .22, but he had found it more comfortable than a heavier gun and adequate for a man who could put a bullet where he aimed. He shoved five cartridges into the cylinders, letting the hammer rest on the sixth, and slid the gun into the holster.

Dorothy Gibson's room was at the end of the hall. The door was locked. Eben admitted himself with a skeleton key and softly closed the door behind him.

In five minutes his search was finished. There was nothing. No letters, no writing to show who she was or where she had come from. Even the labels on her luggage had been mutilated by a knife so that they could not be read.

He understood now why there had been no identification in her handbag. It was the only glimmering of reason in a mad pattern.

Silently Eben Hunt left the dead girl's room.

On the narrow, dusty store window faded lettering read: *Frank Markin, New and Used Books*. A bell tinkled remotely when Eben Hunt entered. Three sides of the small shop were lined with old books; the back wall consisted of a curtained doorway. The store was dim, hushed, and empty.

"Anybody in?" Eben called.

The curtain at the back wall moved slowly aside. Frank Markin stood peering at him with those piercing deep-set eyes of his. Markin hadn't changed much except to have become even thinner and to lost all his hair. He was a beanpole of a man, with narrow, stooped shoulders and a long sunken face in which you noticed nothing but the eyes.

"Hi, lobster," Eben said.

Frank Markin scowled. "Lobster?"

"Red boiled lobsters," Eben said.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Markin came as close to smiling as he ever did and advanced with outstretched hand. "Eben Hunt! I didn't recognize you for a moment. Come into the back and have a snorter."

The snorter consisted of excellent Scotch. Eben refused a second glass and leaned back in the snug leather chair. Frank Markin sat behind a bare oak desk.

"Only one drink?" Markin said. "You weren't like that in college." He chuckled dryly. "I should say we weren't. The Independent Order of the Boiled Lobsters. We got boiled on Saturday nights regularly, as boiled as lobsters. But you said something about red lobsters."

"Boiled lobsters are red," Eben said.

"That's so. And in honor of our ability to get so thoroughly boiled, we called ourselves the Boiled Lobsters. And one Saturday night, when we were more boiled than usual, we went out and got ourselves tattooed with the insignia of our order."



Markin was in shirt sleeves. He unbuttoned his left cuff and rolled up his sleeve to the elbow. Chuckling softly, he turned the hairless side of his forearm to Eben. On it was tattooed a lobster three inches long—a mate to the one on Eben's arm.

"Ever try to get it off?" Eben asked.

"I thought of it on one occasion, but I understand that it is a difficult and painful process," Markin rolled down his sleeve. "There were four of us who had a lobster tattooed on our arms that night. The good old college days. We were as thick as thieves then. Now"—he tapped his arm—"a tattoo is all that we have in common."

Eben lit a cigarette. "What do you hear of the other two, George and Augie?"

"I hear of them, but I don't see them, although we all live in Coast City. Moodily Markin studied the ceiling. "They're out of my class. I'm only a struggling book dealer. Out of your class, too. George Priddy is a corporation lawyer; August Finch a doctor."

"Rich?"

"Oh, yes. George Priddy is rolling in money. Finch has set himself up as a nerve specialist. I hear that he charges frustrated women twenty-five dollars a

visit to tell them to stop drinking and get some sleep."

"Has that made Augie Finch rich?" Eben persisted.

MARKIN'S fierce eyes dropped to bore into Eben. "Very rich," he said slowly. Casually he opened a desk drawer and took out a snub-nosed automatic and leveled it across the desk.

Eben sat very still. One corner of his mouth smiled into the gun muzzle. "What's that for, Frank?"

"For you, Eben," Markin told him. "Your reputation is known to me. Even in college you were suspected of pocketing part of the income from our Junior Prom. You were a bad lot even then."

"And now?"

Markin shrugged stooped shoulders. "Now you're worse. You're a crook and a killer. Do you deny it?"

Eben said nothing.

"It's true, of course," Markin snorted. "I wonder whether your interest in our friends' wealth is because of old time's sake, or because you would like to appropriate some of it for yourself."

Markin said, "I'm going to turn you over to the police."

"No," Eben said stiffly. The police would find his gun on him. At best he could expect a thirty day sentence for the illegal possession of firearms. And he had to be free, because a girl he had asked to take to dinner was dead. "Don't do it, Frank," he said.

"It's my duty," Markin reached for his telephone.

Eben sighed and dropped one shoulder. Suddenly his little revolver was in his right hand.

Markin blinked in disbelief. It didn't seem possible that a human hand could move so fast. Then he tilted the muzzle of his gun up to the face across the desk.

Eben's revolver made a sharp, coughing sound. The automatic flew out of Markin's hand. Markin rose halfway to his feet and froze, staring at his gun on the floor. He looked at his hand, opening and closing his fingers in surprise that he was not wounded. Then he sat heavily in his chair and stared across the desk at the little man.

"Yes, I heard you were very good with a gun," Markin muttered.

Eben showed his teeth. "Very good. Remember I'm a professional."

Markin's long body shriveled in the chair. "Now I suppose you'll kill me."

"Well, no. I don't kill my pals," Eben rose and backed toward the curtained doorway. "So long, lobster. Glad to renew old acquaintances."

As he went across the store, he heard

no sound in the back room. And the street had not been roused by the shot. A .22 revolver is not very loud.

DR. AUGUST FINCH had the swankiest suite of offices in the swanky Medical Arts building. A statuesque blonde nurse received Eben Hunt in the reception room. Her beautiful face did not approve of him. He did not impress her as having a great deal of money to spend on nervous disorders. Dr. Finch, she said, was not in.

"I'm a friend of his," Eben told her. "An old college friend. I'll be in town only a few hours and I know he's anxious to see me."

The nurse looked doubtful. "I believe Dr. Finch is having lunch at the home of George Priddy, the attorney. I'm probably sticking my neck out telling you this"—her abrupt smile was phony—"but I guess it's all right if you're really his friend."

"Thanks." Eben turned to go, then said, "There's something else. I know a young woman from Chicago by the name of Dorothy Gibson. In fact, I recommended her to Dr. Finch for her nerves. How are the treatments progressing?"

From her superior height, the nurse's eyes sharpened. "I'm sorry. I am not permitted to give out information concerning patients."

"Sure," he said pleasantly. "Augie will tell me himself."

Fifteen minutes later Eben Hunt stood in front of a high hedge which barred George Priddy's grounds and home from the vulgar gaze of the masses. He went through the driveway break in the hedge and cut across the spacious lawn broken up by clusters of shrubs. He was halfway to the house when he saw the arm in the grass.

It was a bare, hairy man's arm. For a fleeting moment Eben had an impression that it was dismembered, like the woman's arm he had seen last night. But there was more to it. Stooping, he saw the sleeve of a bright polo shirt starting above the elbow. The rest of the body lay under a flowering hydrangea shrub.

Cautiously he looked around. He was shut off from the street and house by hedge and nearby shrubs. From the house drifted soft radio music. No movement anywhere.

Eben sank to his knees and touched the extended arm. The flesh was cold. He turned the arm over. The stalk-eyes of a lobster looked at him from the underside. Almost, it seemed, the antennae waved in menace. The tattoo artist who had done the job on the four Boiled Lobsters that drunken night eighteen years

ago had been very realistic in his craft.

Eben pushed aside drooping flowers and saw the face under the shrub. George Priddy had put on weight since his college days. His once sharp features had broadened, but it was George beyond doubt. He had been the most brilliant of the four classmates. Now, at the height of his law career, he was dead with a bullet in his head.

Stiffly Eben straightened up. One thing was certain. George Priddy had not fallen under this shrub. He had been shot, then dragged under it to get him out of sight.

Behind Eben there was a whisper of movement. Without taking time to turn, he dropped to the ground like a soldier who hears the approach of a shell. There was a sound like a sneeze. Something rattled in the shrub above him.

Eben's revolver dropped into his hand as he slid around on his stomach. Within an area of twenty feet, there were three other hydrangea shrubs. Behind one of them, he knew, a man with a gun in his hand was watching him. The gun was silenced. That was why nobody in the house had heard the shot which had killed George Priddy.

Silence hung over the lawn. With gun-arm outthrust, Eben waited, his eyes flicking from shrub to shrub. The killer would have to part the shrub in order to get in another shot.

Flowers and branches of the center shrub stirred. A breeze could have caused that, but Eben took no chance. He shot twice.

A scream overlapped the echo of the shots. A heavy weight crashed through the bush and a man pitched toward Eben. Coldly, deliberately, Eben shot again. Abruptly the scream ended. The man lay still.

He was a big man. As Eben went forward he told himself that he had killed Augie Finch. But when he lifted the head, he saw that the face was brutal, the small eyes piggish. It belonged to Art Yard, a gunsel who was reputed to be tops with any weapon. But he hadn't been good enough.

Suddenly Eben realized that somebody was shouting in the house. He scurried behind the shrub just as Dr. August Finch rounded a corner of the house.

Eben hadn't seen Augie since their college days, but there was no mistaking that beefy body and that narrow peer behind thick-lensed glasses. He had removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves for comfort. The dark splotch on his left forearm was visible. That was the fourth tattooed lobster.

A woman in a housecoat came out on the porch. Probably she was George Priddy's wife. "August, was it you who screamed?" she asked excitedly.

Finch peered toward the shrubbery. "No. And there were three sounds—like shots." He swung toward the porch. "Where's George?"

"Oh, my heavens!" Mrs. Priddy moaned. "I thought he was with you!"

Eben heard her distantly. His small form slunk from shrub to shrub until he reached the hedge. He got into the street and kept going.

CHAPTER III

IN the evening it became cool, but Eben Hunt carried his jacket over his right arm and had rolled up his shirt sleeves to his shoulders. As he sat at a bar drinking beer, he moved his skinny right arm a great deal. This was the fifth or sixth beer joint he had been in. So far the tattooed lobster hadn't received more than indifferent glances. Nobody cared about his little distinction.

The evening paper was spread out before him. The second pair of killings in twenty-four hours rated the banner headline:

LAWYER AND GANGSTER SLAIN PROMINENT PHYSICIAN VANISHES

Eben read Mrs. Priddy's statement twice. Dr. Finch, she said, had acted distraught during lunch. When her husband, George, had asked him what was wrong, Dr. Finch had replied, with a nervous glance at Mrs. Priddy, that he would tell him later. After lunch the two men had gone out to the back terrace, to smoke cigars in the sun and discuss whatever had been on Dr. Finch's mind.

She had heard shots and a man scream. She had rushed out of the house to find Dr. Finch standing at the side of the porch. She hadn't seen either of the dead men then. In fact, not until after she had phoned the police. While phoning, Dr. Finch had left and had not been seen since.

According to the newspaper, the police were baffled. Obviously Art Yard, a notorious gunman, had shot and killed George Priddy. The silenced revolver had been found clenched in Yard's dead hand. The gangster had been killed by bullets from a .22 caliber revolver—probably by Dr. Finch who had tried unsuccessfully to save his friend's life. Yet why had Dr. Finch fled from the police?

Eben Hunt brushed the paper aside and picked up his glass. He'd had a break. If he had been seen, the police would be

looking for him. He would have lost his essential freedom of movement.

A man near the end of the bar stepped back and stared at Eben's forearm. Eben's breath quickened. Was this a reaction at last?

The man, carrying his glass, came over. He was not much bigger than Eben and he needed a shave. His eyes were fixed on the tattooed lobster.

"Funny," he said. "Just like the one Charlie Falkner got."

"What is?" Eben asked, though he knew the answer.

"That lobster on your arm. Only Charlie's wasn't tattooed. It was a little toy one, celluloid or something. You know Charlie?"

"No."

The man liked to talk without prodding. "Charlie's a hack driver like me. Shell-shocked in the war, but he's getting along fine now. I mean, he's well enough to drive a taxi. Our cabs was parked down the corner at the stand and we was standing there talking. Charlie opens the door of his hack, and there's a little red box on the seat. He says, 'Now what's this?' and opens the box. There's a tiny red lobster inside, just like you got on your arm, only it's a toy sort of."

Eben said sharply, "How long ago was this?"

"Couple of minutes. Maybe five." The man drank and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. "Funny. I mean, Charlie just stood there looking at the lobster. I ask him what it is and how come somebody leaves it for him, but he don't answer. His eyes are funny. I mean, like he's shell-shocked, only I thought he was all better. He don't say a word. He gets behind the wheel."

"I ask him, 'Where you going, Charlie?' He still don't look at me. He kicks the starter and says kind of to himself, 'Hilda Whittier.' Then he drives off."

Eben was getting into his jacket. "Who's Hilda Whittier?"

"You know that rich dame who's always getting into the papers on account of she messes around with so many guys. I had her for a fare plenty times. I guess Charlie was supposed to pick her up at eight and just remembered. But why did he act so funny all of a sudden? I mean, he finds that lobster and then—"

"Where does Hilda Whittier live?"

"A couple of blocks over in the ritzy Tower Apartments," the man said. "She's got a penthouse, though she lives alone. I drove her plenty, and I can tell you things—"

His eyes narrowed. "Say, there's something screwy. Charlie finds a lobster and

gets wacky, and you got one on your arm and get so excited when I tell you—”

Eben was no longer listening. He had dropped money on the bar and was on the way out.

THIS lungs were on fire when he pounded up to the ornate entrance of the apartment building. He grabbed the doorman's arm and panted, “Hilda Whittier!”

The doorman looked superciliously down at the flushed little man and shrugged him off. “Miss Whittier just went into that taxi.”

Eben swung to the yellow cab pulling away from the curb. As he ran toward it, he glimpsed a woman nestling in a corner of the back seat. He leaped on the running board before the car gathered speed. Clinging to the door handle, he poked his head through the lowered front window.

“Stop!” he yelled.

Charlie Falkner came down on the brake and stared at Eben. His eyes were dull, almost lifeless. A nerve ticked in his sallow cheek, his hands shook on the wheel. Wordlessly his mouth hung open.

“What's this?” Hilda Whittier was leaning forward. “Driver, who is this man?”

“Dunno,” Charlie muttered vacantly.

Horns honked urgently. Eben glanced around and saw that the cab was blocking the street. Doubt hit him. On the way here he had told himself that the cab would blow up the moment the driver stepped on the starter. Yet the motor was running and the cab remained intact.

Was he all wrong? Was he making a fool of himself?

“What about the red lobster?” Eben said desperately.

“Lobster?” Hilda Whittier echoed in the back seat. “Driver, has this man lost his mind?”

Still Charlie had no words, but his eyes flicked to the windshield. Propped on the narrow windshield ledge, next to a pack of cigarettes, was a little red celluloid lobster.

“That's it!” Eben turned his head to the woman. “Get out of here, Miss Whittier! Your life—”

Charlie's low moan pulled Eben's eyes back to him. The driver was leaning sideways in his seat, his hand groping along the floorboard. Eben glimpsed a toggle-switch lying loosely on the floorboard, and two wires running down under the car.

“No!” Eben reached through the window in a frenzied attempt to tear Charlie's hand away. A man with longer arms couldn't have made it. Charlie's hand closed over the switch.

Eben threw himself off the running-

board. His heels hit the curb. He felt himself toppling. Then the blast hit him and sent him sprawling on his back. Thunder crashed against his eardrums. Concussion sent him all the way across the sidewalk and against the wall of the building.

Stunned silence hung over the street for an eternal moment. Then somewhere a woman screamed stridently. It was like a signal releasing other voices. Running feet flashed by Eben's eyes.

Slowly Eben straightened up. He was jarred and breathless, but unhurt, a wheel lay within five feet of him on the sidewalk. Where the cab had been there was rubble and broken cement. Something that looked like a broken life-size doll lay in a twisted heap across the street.

Eben did not try to see more. For a little while he was isolated and forgotten against the wall, lost in the horror and confusion and bewilderment of people running and gawking. Within a minute Eben was beyond sight and sound of the latest pair of murders.

THE police were hunting for him. Eben heard it on a store radio an hour later, while he was taking the shoulder-holster and revolver out of the jacket pocket into which he had crammed them earlier that evening. Hidden in the shadows, he put on the holster and listened to the radio news.

The man in the beer joint had described the little man who had been interested in Charlie Falkner and Hilda Whittier, so had the doorman. Because Eben had been under suspicion where two similar killings had been concerned last night, Inspector Swick fitted the description to him.

But Eben Hunt had not thrown a bomb into the cab, as had at first been assumed. The bomb squad had found that TNT packed under the car had caused the explosion, and a switch had set it off. Hunt couldn't have done that or he would have been blown up himself.

Eben continued to listen to the radio. The newscaster sounded puzzled. What was the answer? Another suicide pact like last night? But it was hard for the police to believe any intimacy between poor, shell-shocked Charlie Falkner and rich, socially prominent Hilda Whittier.

Meanwhile, the police were wondering if the shooting at noon of George Pridy and Art Yard could have any connection between the two explosions which had caused four lives. Dr. Finch, wanted by the police for questioning in the shooting, was still missing.

Eben stepped out into the street. He walked boldly through the night, keeping to the busiest streets because he knew

that protection from the police lay in being one of many. His eyes were alert, restless. His hand was never far from his gun. He didn't fear the police as much as he feared sudden death from another source. He had too much knowledge to be permitted to live.

NEARLY all the windows of the Medical Arts Building were dark. The lobby was, at the moment, deserted. Eben went past the elevators to the fire stairs and walked up eight flights. In front of a door marked *Dr. August Finch* he paused for breath. The door swung open when he turned the knob.

Light was in in the waiting room. Loosening his gun in its holster, he crossed to the reception room. The statuesque blonde nurse sat behind her square white desk.

She did not seem surprised to see him. "Hello, Mr. Hunt," she said brightly.

"I didn't tell you my name when I was here."

"Dr. Finch told me. I said you went to college with him and described you, and he told me your name was Eben Hunt." She smiled up at him warmly and intimately, but the set of her luscious red mouth was too mechanical.

"When did Dr. Finch tell you that?" Eben asked.

"This afternoon when he came here."

"Did he stay long?"

"He came and went." The nurse glanced around to the door at her back. "He was worried and in a hurry. He told me to cancel all his appointments."

Eben went to the door behind the desk. With his back to the nurse, he took out his gun and held it close to his hip and pushed in the door. The examination room beyond was dark. He stood peering into the darkness, listening. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the nurse had not even turned to see what he was up to. Indifferently she was filing her nails.

He took a single step into the dark room and fumbled along the wall for the switch. Light flowed over the spacious examination room. Nobody was there.

Frowning, Eben looked into the washroom and into the closet. Then he put up his gun, put out the light, and closed the door behind him.

The nurse looked up at him with her slow intimate smile. She didn't ask him what he was looking for.

"Isn't it past your working hours?" he asked.

"I was just about to go home." She rose and stood inches taller than he.

"Waiting for the doctor to come back?"

"I was making out bills." She put on a

cloth coat over her uniform and looked at him, waiting.

Eben said, "Don't you know that the police are looking for Dr. Finch?"

"The police were here early this afternoon; right after Dr. Finch left. I told them I saw him take his gun. He keeps it in his desk over there." Her words came out listlessly, as if she were not interested in what she said.

Together they left the office. When they were in the elevator, the nurse took his arm and hugged it close to her. The elevator operator turned his head to hide a grin. Eben squirmed, feeling that the woman who towered over him made him look ridiculous.

When they were in the street, she said. "My place isn't far. Would you like to come up for a drink?"

Eben nodded. He hadn't been absolutely sure before, but now he was. As they walked in silence, she held his arm close to her—his right arm, the arm he needed to get at his gun. He kept watching her, but he made no attempt to get his arm free. It wouldn't come from the outside. She was slated to be the instrument of destruction.

She entered her apartment ahead of him, put on the light, and stopped. Eben stepped around her. A small red box stood on an end-table near the door. For a little time she stood fingering the box in bewilderment before she lifted the lid.

A small red celluloid lobster lay inside.

CHAPTER IV

THE lobster held the nurse's eyes. Eben leaned against the wall, saying nothing, his glance flicking about the room. When he looked back at her, the nurse's set inviting smile was fixed on him.

"Let's sit down," she said, taking his arm and leading him to the couch.

He did not take his eyes from her. "How about the drink?"

"Drink?" Briefly she looked puzzled before the phony smile returned. "Oh, yes. Drink. Later." She dropped down on the couch and patted the cushion beside her. "Sit down here close to me."

She wasn't really brazen. It was as if she were acting the scene out behind foot-lights.

Gingerly Eben sat down. His muscles were bunched, his nerves taut. He watched her hands. The one nearest to him slid along the back of the couch. He turned quickly, fearful that she had slipped past his guard. But she was only putting her arm about his shoulder.

He twisted back to face her, knowing that he had been tricked. Her other hand

was out of sight under the cushion on the other side of her.

Eben lunged across her lap and got both hands around her wrist and pulled. Her hand reappeared, and in it there was a toggle-switch from which two wires dangled.

Then he was fighting her for his life. For both their lives. Frantically her fingers strove to snap the switch. She was as strong as he was. Insane fury possessed her. She squirmed, clawed, and bit, while Eben concentrated on preventing the small pressure which would complete the circuit.

Savagely he butted her under the chin. Her head snapped against the back of the couch; momentarily her fingers loosened. But he did not dare snatch at the switch. One of his hands swooped under the switch, found the wire, and tugged. They tore loose. He rolled away from the girl and stood up, panting.

She giggled. She gathered up the now disconnected switch and snapped it, then looked triumphantly up at him.

"Now are you satisfied?" he said.

She rose to her feet and casually fluffed her hair. "You couldn't stop me," she chortled. "I did it."

"Not quite." Eben tried to pull the couch away from the wall. An obstruction held it back. She watched him with idle curiosity as he lifted one end of the couch and pulled it away from the thing jammed beneath it.

"Dr. Finch!" The name was a moan in the nurse's suddenly choked throat.

Dr. Finch's plump body lay on its back. The dead eyes stared up at the ceiling. Eben bent over him. Dried blood stained the shirt over the heart where the knife had entered. He had been dead for hours.

"I didn't do it!" the nurse shrilled. "I swear I didn't know he was here." She was out of it beyond doubt. Sight of the corpse had brought her back.

"I'm sure you didn't," Eben told her gently. He went to the other end of the couch and lifted it away. Between the spread legs of the body was a low, narrow box. From two small holes in the top two loose wires dangled.

"Filled with TNT," Eben said. "If I hadn't torn away the wires, we would have been blown to bits when you snapped the switch. We two and the dead man."

"Switch?" she whimpered. "What switch?" She was swaying from side to side and running her hands over her face like a person who had just awakened from a nightmare.

"You've forgotten," he said. "You were supposed to forget if anything went wrong."

She stared at him. "What are you talk-

ing about? I didn't want to blow us up. I didn't want to die."

"You didn't know," he said grimly. "All you knew was that you were supposed to snap a switch."

He started toward the door. She ran after him. "Don't leave me here alone with—with Dr. Finch," she pleaded.

"Call the police."

"But what can I tell them?"

"Anything," he said and went out.

IT WAS still early enough at night for an occasional store to be doing business. But would the place he was bound for be open? If it wasn't, he would be delayed. In the end, it wouldn't change anything—unless he allowed himself to be come careless.

The store front was dark. Eben pressed his face against the dusty window and peered past the displayed books into the interior. A trickle of light came through one end of the curtain across the back doorway. Somebody was in that back room.

He moved on to the store vestibule. The door was locked.

"So you are still alive, Eben?" a voice said in his ear. "I was afraid of that."

Eben's hand started moving up to his shoulder. He checked himself when he felt a gun pressed into his back. He was too close against the door. The store vestibule was too cramped for a quick turn. He had been careless after all, and carelessness meant death.

Standing rigidly, Eben looked over his shoulder. A street lamp made severely angular lights and shadows of Frank Markin's gaunt face. The black eyes were lost in the deep sockets. The gun boring into his back was, of course, the one he had shot out of the bookseller's hand that morning.

"I knew what to expect," Eben said. "I tore out the wire before she could snap the switch."

"So? It was obvious even this morning that you knew too much. I should have killed you then."

"But you couldn't." Every word Eben uttered gave him that much longer to live. "Not only because I shot the gun out of your hand. You don't want your corpses near you or near anything belonging to you. Did you think I'd meekly let the nurse blow us both up in her apartment?"

Markin's stooped shoulders rose and fell. "I was prepared for an alternative. It appeared that if you escaped death, you would come to my store." He chuckled dryly, mirthlessly. "And you, a professional gunman, fell into my second trap."

"Except that you don't shoot now be-

cause you don't like the idea of a body in your doorway," Eben said.

Markin was silent, thinking it over. Eben waited, his right hand chest high. But there was not enough room.

"We will walk down the street," Markin said presently. "It is reasonably dark and few people come along at this hour. If you force my hand, I'll shoot you no matter what the circumstances."

"You can't afford not to," Eben said.

Markin kept the gun against Eben's back as Eben sidled out of the vestibule. With a quick step, Markin was beside him, holding his gun into Eben's rib. There was no immediate advantage in being out of the vestibule. At the far corner a man and woman were lingering near a doorway, but Eben knew that he could count on no outside help.

"No tricks," Martin whispered harshly. "First of all, I'll take your gun."

As he crossed his arm to Eben's shoulder, Eben laughed in his face. "You're scared to death of me even though I walked into your trap."

"You're a professional," Markin muttered. He leaned against Eben to reach the holster.

"Sure, Frank," Eben said. "Watch."

His knee was rising as he spoke. It jabbed into Markin's groin. In that instant of agony, as he started to double up, Markin forgot about his gun. Then he remembered and squeezed the trigger, but Eben was no longer there.

He stood at Markin's side, waiting with his little revolver in his hand. Markin straightened all the way up and spun toward him. Casually Eben shot him through the heart.

EEBEN HUNT settled his small form in Inspector Swick's best office chair and set fire to one of the inspector's cigars.

"So it was a murder business," Swick was saying, "as ruthless and horrible as anything I've ever come across. Mrs. Daly confessed when I confronted her with what I knew. Seems her husband was thinking of divorcing her, but she preferred his whole fortune to the settlement he'd make. She knew he hadn't changed his will yet.

"Somehow she contacted Frank Markin or he contacted her. We're not sure of that detail yet, but the fact is that the price was ten grand for the job. No fuss, no suspicion, no complications. In the same way somebody hired Markin, and his accomplice Art Yard, to do away with Hilda Whittier, though we don't yet know who. I wouldn't be surprised if Markin had other clients he was getting set to murder for."

Eben waved his cigar. "Markin gave satisfaction. The clients, as you call them, could be out of town during the murder. The fact that it seemed to be a double killing, or a suicide pact, or a murder by one of the victims that went wrong would divert normal suspicion from them."

"Markin and Yard were always away from the scene of the crime during the murders. The TNT charges had been set some time in advance, probably by Art Yard who was good at that kind of thing. Then the ones who were to carry out the executions got the signal."

"Executions!" Swick snorted. "It was suicide. Dorothy Gibson and Charlie Falkner blew themselves up along with Dan Daly and Hilda Whittier." He scowled. "You said something about hypnotism. You're nuts."

"No," Eben said. "It occurred to me for the first time when I learned how Dorothy Gibson had died."

"I'm telling you," Swick insisted. "There's not a hypnotist in the world can make people murder, let alone kill themselves."

"But that's just the point," Eben said. "They didn't know what they were doing. Frank Markin selected particularly susceptible subjects to hypnotize, people who suffered from nervous disorders. He worked it through post-hypnotic suggestion. While they were under his spell, he ordered them to become acquainted with their intended victims. That wasn't much of a demand to make on them. There was nothing in their moral code to object to making friends with certain people. When the stage was set and the TNT placed, he gave them a post-hypnotic suggestion to snap a certain switch at a certain time."

SLOWLY Swick nodded. "I've seen it done as a joke. You hypnotize a guy and tell him that tomorrow when he hears a certain song played on the radio he should whoop like an Indian. The guy wakes up and walks out, normal as you please; he's forgotten he's been hypnotized. Then next day he hears that song and whoops like an Indian. He doesn't know why, but he can't help himself."

"Exactly," Eben said. "Markin's post-hypnotic suggestion didn't make any greater demand than that. All his stooges were instructed to do was to take their victims to a certain place and snap an ordinary toggle-switch. They had no idea that the act would kill them. They were merely snapping a switch during hypnotic compulsion. They didn't live long enough after that to learn that it meant murder and suicide."

"And the red lobsters, I suppose, were

the signal, like the song over the radio."

"That's right," Eben said. "When they were under Markin's hypnotic spell, they were instructed that sight of a red lobster was the sign for them to carry out the post-hypnotic suggestion. I suppose he used it because there was a lobster tattooed on his arm and his subjects were acutely aware of it while he was hypnotizing them."

"Anyway, the lobster was hard luck for him. I could vaguely connect the lobster Dorothy Gibson had received with the three other Boiled Lobsters of my college days. Later events made me sure, but it was a tossup between Dr. Finch and Frank Markin until I found that Finch had been murdered."

Eben drew deeply on the cigar and then studied the tip. "Markin's second bad break was that Dorothy Gibson happened to be a patient of Dr. Finch. I've heard that sometimes nerve patients are cured through hypnotism. Probably Finch hypnotized her. While under the spell she spoke about Markin. We'll never really know, but it's sure that Finch got the idea that Markin was up to no good. That's what he wanted to discuss with George Priddy after lunch.

"Chances are that Finch questioned Markin before seeing Priddy. And then my visit to his book store told Markin that I knew something as well. The basic idea of his murder business was to keep the crimes as far from him as possible. Markin picked his executioners from chance visitors to his store. He probably drew them into discussion there, then tricked them into hypnotism. The other three Boiled Lobsters could connect the

celluloid lobsters with the tattooed lobsters on our arms. He'd be suspected and investigated.

"Markin was desperate and in a hurry. He saw a good chance to eliminate the three of us at one time, though he didn't think he had time to rig up an explosion. So he sent Art Yard to use his gun. I killed Yard before he could finish more than a third of the job."

"But why did Finch run away?" Swick asked.

"He didn't run away. He had no evidence against Markin. He ran to get his gun and maybe scare the truth out of him. Markin lured him up to the nurse's apartment and stabbed him. That left me. He was afraid to handle me himself because I was better at that kind of thing than he was. So he went back to his remote-control method of murder.

"It seemed likely that sooner or later I would go up to Dr. Finch's office. So he went up there and hypnotized the nurse to take me up to her place whenever she saw me."

There was a silence. Swick rolled a pencil between his palms and then looked up at Eben with a crooked smile. "So you killed Frank Markin, and before that Art Yard, with a weapon you possessed illegally." His smile broadened into a fat grin. "Though why should I tick?"

Eben Hunt puffed his cigar and rubbed his sleeve over the tattooed lobster. There had been four Boiled Lobsters, he was thinking wearily—four carefree college boys who eighteen years ago drank more than was good for them. And now there was one.



Cell to Let

By Kathleen Ryan

This murder-bent con handed himself his crime-earned penalty.



bad boys acting up?"

Warden Brown shook his head slowly. "I wish it were as simple as that," he said. "I can handle disturbances in prison. It's when a man leaves—a man who is better behind bars. That's when I commence to worry."

"But that isn't your worry, Warden," objected Jimmy. "You're not responsible for a man after he gets out."

"I know, Jimmy." Warden Brown smiled ruefully. "But I'm worried about Dan Bellinger just the same. He's no good. A killer."

"Dan Bellinger. The name sounds familiar. Say I remember him," Jimmy said thoughtfully. "Covered his trial. Wasn't it about five years ago?"

Warden Brown nodded. "Bellinger got out today. He was a model prisoner, but I always had the feeling that he was just marking time. That he had some unfinished business to take care of when he was given his freedom. It wasn't anything that you could put your finger on. He didn't talk much when he was awake—and—this may sound crazy, but he talked in his sleep. The guards say he was always after a guy named Bill."

Jimmy grinned. "Well, that's better than a moll named Bess." He dragged himself reluctantly off the chair and started for the door. "See you again, Warden. I'll keep my eyes and ears open. If I happen to come across Bellinger in town, I'll keep you informed."

OVER on the other side of town, Dan Bellinger ceased pacing his small bedroom and threw himself on the bed. "Might as well relax," he muttered to himself irritably. Two a. m. wouldn't come any faster—no matter what he did. Anyway, what were a few hours' waiting

"GOOD EVENING, Warden. Say you look worried!" Jimmy Salmon, reporter, pushed his hat to the back of his head and straddled a chair. "One of your

compared with the five years of hell he had endured?

A wave of hatred crept over him like an evil shadow and left him trembling. He had always hated Bill Hayes. Even in the days when they just pinched fruit from the pushcarts over on the East Side, Bill had invariably squealed when he got caught. After doing time in reform school, Bill had got himself a job and had gone straight. Well, as far as Dan was concerned, that was just dandy. As long as Bill kept out of his hair, he didn't care what he did.

Dan almost forgot about Bill—until the night Dan tried to pull the bank job. Bill had recognized him loitering outside the bank and had notified the police. They had caught him red-handed. He didn't have a chance. It was the last time that Bill would ever squeal on him. At 2 a. m. he was going over to Bill's rooming house to kill him.

Slowly the minutes ticked on. He got up, lit a cigarette, commenced pacing the room again. At a quarter to two, he put on his overcoat, turned up his collar, pulled a hat well down over his eyes. Five minutes later he was out on the street.

Funny how quiet it was. Just the crunching of snow under his feet. Far off a train whistle blew. A lonely sound in the quiet night. Then, around the corner came a cop. He ducked into a doorway, held his breath in the shadows until the policeman passed.

Bill lived just two blocks over, in old Mrs. Benson's rooming house. Shouldn't be hard to break into that joint, he thought. He had lived there once himself. There was a back window he used to use when he was out on a job. Mrs. Benson had an uncanny knowledge of the time that her roomers got in via the front door.

"Got a match, buddy?" Dan whirled around, his hand gripping the gun in his overcoat pocket. But the shabby man who asked the question didn't look dangerous. He fished down in his pocket, silently handed out a match. The man muttered something and shuffled off in the darkness.

Mrs. Benson's rooming house was in the middle of the block, separated from

its neighbor by a narrow lane. He walked slowly by the house, noted that it was in complete darkness. From the sidewalk he could see a white sign on the front door, but he wasn't very curious.

"Probably room to let," he muttered to himself. Then he gave a dry chuckle. Tomorrow she could change that sign to rooms to let.

Dan looked quickly up and down the dark street, before he ducked into the lane and made his way to the back of the house. Over on the other street a dog started to bark. After a moment of fright, reason told him that he wasn't the object of the barking. He was too far away. Nevertheless he waited until the barking had stopped. Then, he went to the kitchen window and raised it gently. It opened with the same ease as of yore.

There was a peculiar smell in the house. Like nothing he had ever smelled before. He choked for a minute, then held his breath for fear he had been heard. But there was no sound. He shivered slightly. It felt like a dead house.

He crept across the kitchen and opened the door that led into the hall. The smell was even stronger there. His eyes started to water and his head felt curiously light. He staggered toward the stairs.

Funny how much effort it took to climb them. He would just sit down for a min-

ute and rest. It wouldn't matter if Bill lived a few minutes longer . . . few minutes . . . longer.

HELLO. Put Warden Brown on the phone, will you, please?" Jimmy Salmon was plenty excited. "Hello, Warden? I've got news for you. You don't have to worry any more about Dan Bellinger. He was found dead in a rooming house over on the other side of town.

"No . . . no, he wasn't shot. He died under most unusual circumstances. It seems that old Mrs. Benson who runs the place, decided to call in some fumigating experts to destroy the roaches and bugs that have been making the lives of her roomers unbearable.

"Well, the exterminators arrived last evening and used some new kind of poison, spraying it around the house. No one was to be allowed back into the house for thirty-six hours.

"Seems that the fumes are as fatal to humans as they are to the bugs. In fact, the men hung a sign on the front door when they left, warning people of the danger.

"What that, Warden? Oh, he crawled in a window at the back. I guess he never even saw the sign. And, Warden, when Bellinger talked in his sleep he told the truth. Yeah . . . he was out gunning for a guy named Bill."

You ease off beard in jigtyme, men,
With Thin Gillettes—four blades for ten—
They save you dough and treat you well—
And your face sure looks and feels swell!



Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

A Kill for the Shill

By Fergus Truelow



Billy Watson's first Hollywood role seemed slated to be his last. For his casting director was a revolver and his producer a kill-mad gunman. And Billy had to write new lines in blood-red ink or win state's cyanide Oscar.

LISCOMBE'S words boomed at me as if he were shouting down a barrel, "Gonna play ball, you lousy little shill?"

It's hard to say no when you're flat on your back on the floor of a cheap hotel room with a big killer's high-heeled boot rammed into your guts. The words stuck in my throat.

But I got it out. "No!" I choked. "I'm an actor, not a blackmailer!"

Oh Gosh, I thought. This is happen-

ing to me, *Billy Watson*. My hair is going grey with waiting for a chance at a Hollywood bit part, and when it comes it's a phony . . .

Liscomb, a rangy, black-haired movie cowboy, sat down on the edge of the bed and sucked on his reefer until it glowed. His big, steely fingers folded my copy of *Variety* into a paper strap an inch wide.

"So you're an actor?" he chuckled.

The folded paper cut through the air, licked along my neck like a hot lash. "Damn you!" I whispered.

"An actor, huh?" Liscomb licked his lips. "You're a shill—a come-on man for a cheap carnival pitch. That's what I found you doing, ain't it?"

I winced. "That's only while I'm waiting for a break."

Liscomb wasn't grinning now. I could see little green flickers deep in his eyes. He forked greasy marijuana smoke out of his nostrils.

"An actor, only you won't act," he sneered. "For old times' sake I offer you a bit part when you been in town less'n an hour. An' you turn up your nose."

He leaned down and blew reefer smoke into my face until I gagged. Then he jammed that high-heeled boot into me and kicked, hard.

A cold, black breeze seemed to blow over me.

When I woke up I just lay there, looking at him. I was remembering the carnival circuit rumors about how Liscomb had killed a railroad dick by red-lighting him off a show train in the Mojave. Another time he'd thumbed an eyeball out of a small town cop's skull.

The scales wavered. My self-respect hung on one side. All I knew about Liscomb hung on the other.

He showed a pure killer streak when he'd been on one of these reefer rodeos.

I hoisted the white flag. "OK" I said. "I'll play ball."

I GOT to my feet slowly, dusted off my suit of banker's stripe and straightened my tie. I stand a little under five feet. The words I'd just said seemed to shrink that by a foot.

Liscomb sat there grinning. "Where'd I tell you this guy Melton is staying?"

"Glenshiel Arms," I said. "Apartment 224."

My throat felt dry and tight. Well, I'd run Liscomb's dirty errand, then lam out of town without touching a dime of the money.

Liscomb tossed the rest of the setup at me. "Here's all you need to know.

James Melton is a broker from back East. Never been out here to the Coast before. He's loaded, dirty with moola. My partner's got him all softened up for the touch."

"What do I have to do?"

The movie cowboy leaned forward, his eyes cold as a barracuda's. "The deal was for me to go to Melton's apartment for the payoff this afternoon. But I'm ad-libbing in a frill of my own."

"You mean I haul in the hay for you, collect the blackmail payoff?"

"No. You go to Melton's apartment instead of me, but act scared of hidden mikes and cops."

"That much is easy, anyway," I told him bitterly.

Liscomb ran a red tongue over his lips. "Even if he offers to pay off, you don't take it. You say for him to bring the dough along where he's goin' this afternoon. Tell him to give it to a messenger, the cowboy singer in the white sombrero. That's me."

"You?"

"He don't know it yet, but we're gonna meet. That's all."

Sure, I thought. That's all. If the law crashes in, I'm the principal, and you're only a pee-wee accomplice.

"What name do I use?" I asked aloud.

"You don't. You use a time."

"Come again?"

"You use a time, stupid!" Liscomb snarled. "We figured that out, me and my partner. You ring Melton's bell in the foyer of the Glenshiel at exactly four twenty-eight this afternoon. Not thirty seconds sooner or later. At four twenty-eight. That's so he knows who it is. The door will buzz and you go up in the elevator. Apartment 224 is first on the right on the second floor. The door is unlocked. You don't knock. Walk in."

"That all?" I asked.

"Gimme your leather."

I handed him my wallet and he ripped out the selective service registration card. "You know how long you'd last on any carnival lot without a draft card," he grunted, tossing me the wallet.

"Yes, I know," I sighed.

My ears were singing. A funny, tight, twisted feeling had set up housekeeping right behind my eyes. But it was no use. I learned a long time ago I couldn't tear big guys to pieces with my bare hands. You've got to fight with the weapons you're born with.

In my case it's acting.

Liscomb let up another Mary Warner and reached for his guitar. "After the blow-off you get your draft card back.

Now seram. You'll have an hour before punching that bell. Play it right, an' maybe, just maybe, I won't kick a lung outa you."

AT EXACTLY four twenty-eight I walked into the foyer of the Glen-shiel Arms and pushed the button under James Melton's card on the brass panel.

The inner door buzzed back, made me jump. I walked into the empty lobby, took the automatic elevator and got off at the second floor.

Apartment 224 was next to the elevator. I checked the number twice before I touched the knob. My hand was so sweaty it slipped in my grasp.

I shut the door behind me. The room was empty. A blaze of afternoon sunlight made highlights on walnut furniture, and brought out the soft glow of a green-and-gold Oriental rug.

"Hello," I said. My voice sounded like a stranger's in my ears.

No answer. The smell of burnt feathers tainted the air. I swallowed hard. All of a sudden the beating of my own heart sounded loud.

The bedroom door was half open. "Hello," I said again, this time louder. I walked toward the door with my stomach gone A.W.O.L.

A man's feet stuck out over the edge of the bed. Two steps more and I stood in the doorway.

The man on the bed was small, about my size, only younger, and with black, curly hair. His brown eyes were wide open, with a wondering look as if he were trying to figure out how the blue-rimmed hole in his forehead had gotten there.

For a long second I stood still. I couldn't remember how to breathe, but my brain photographed every detail.

The back of his head lay in a red mush of blood and brains on the pillow. On the floor was another pillow, crumpled with a black spot in the middle of it, and a .38 Colt automatic. The explained the smell of burnt feathers.

A green silk dressing gown hung over the foot of the bed. On a chair a dark suit had been laid out neatly, ready to wear. A calendar on a bedside table showed the wrong date.

All this I took in before I could force myself to step over beside the bed and touch the dead guy's hand. He was still warm.

I had hold of ten thousand volts and knew it. *Out of here, shum!* I told myself.

I'd hardly covered ten feet of the ten furlongs of Oriental rug between me and the hall door when somebody punched the buzzer and knocked at the same time.

Cops! I knew it as well as if I could see right through the hardwood door. It was no surprise to my brain, but the rest of me reacted like you do when you step into an icy shower.

There was no other way out of that apartment, either. You could feel that about the place, even while the knocking at the door came again, louder, coppier.

Every guy to his weapon. The trapped rat uses his teeth. The gunsel reaches for his rod. With me it's acting.

I whipped back into the bedroom, grabbed the green silk dressing gown off the foot of the bed, slid into it, and was out in the living room with the bedroom door shut behind me when the law burst in.

"Yes, yes," I remarked testily. "I'm coming!"

TWO city dicks stood there, open-mouthed. One was short, fat, reddish complexioned. He walked back on his heels.

The younger, taller dick wore grey gabardine and black-and-white shoes.

I gave them a look of indignation, letting my eyes pop a little. "Well," I snapped. "What's the meaning of this?"

What the hell, I'd been working the same gag on the town clowns wherever a carnival pitch drew squawks from suckers, hadn't I?

The fat, red-faced dick spoke up. "We're from the detective bureau. We've got a tip that—"

"How do I know you're police officers?" I cut in.

That was pure flattery. To my eye they might as well have been wearing blue uniforms and blowing whistles.

The red-faced dick flashed his buzzer. "You Mr. James Melton?" he asked uncertainly.

"Who did you think I was?" I asked with deliberate unpleasantness.

Somebody spoke through the open door from out in the hall. "I can vouch for Mr. Melton, although we've never met. He's my broker."

I looked at the guy who had spoken. My mouth fell open. I shut it again, quickly, before flies could get in.

Doug Drake, the rising young movie star! You couldn't miss the unruly brown curls above the Adonis profile the camera and the dames simply ate up!

A little blue-eyed woman in a brown, tailored job stood beside him.

"Come in!" I managed to gasp. Drake and the woman stepped in. I gave the cops the slow burn. They took the hint, sidled toward the door. "Excuse it, Mr.

Melton. Our mistake," the red-faced dick whispered, perspiring.

I nodded curtly and shut the door behind them.

Doug Drake spoke up. "Nice to know you in person instead of by wire, Mr. Melton. I want you to meet Miss O'Quinn. She lives right here in the Glenshiel Arms. Miss O'Quinn, Mr. Melton."

"Mary O'Quinn, the agent?" I gulped.

The little, blue-eyed woman smiled. In spite of a few threads of grey in her hair, she looked as smooth, hard and polished as a new chestnut. "You've heard of me?"

"Who hasn't?" I shot back, too quickly.

A broker wouldn't know that this lady ten-percenter handled the cream of the Hollywood character actors. You learned that by reading *Variety* in cheap hotel rooms and dreaming of the break you'd get some day.

I corrected my mistake. "I mean, you're Doug Drake's agent, aren't you?"

She shook her head. "He's not in my stable now. But I signed him up when he first came to town as plain Anthony Wheeler. Now he's Doug Drake. I'm proud of my part in that."

Doug Drake gave her the famous slow smile that melts the dames for miles around, and patted her arm. He turned to me. "We've come to take you to the party, Mr. Melton."

"The party?" I said, as if my mind were full of big-time financial deals.

He glanced at his watch. "Yes, it's nearly five o'clock," he warned. "We'll wait while you finish getting ready."

"I'll be right with you," I said and gulped.

The minute the words were out of my mouth I heard the crackling noise of my bridges burning behind me. It was root hog or die, now.

I WENT into the bedroom, shut the door, and leaned against it. My legs were quivering a little. From here on out Billy Watson was James Melton, broker, and a newcomer to Hollywood.

One of the ways to sink into a new part is to dress for it. The suit laid out on the chair caught my eye. It took me maybe one minute to skin into it and find it a perfect fit.

I patted the pockets to find out about myself. Item one: A billfold, well padded with lettuce. I lifted the folding money out gingerly and dropped it on the chair. A murder rap would be plenty without carrying a dead guy's money away.

Item two: An envelope with a real estate agent's name printed on it and a key inside. I kept that.

Item three: A gold watch and chain. It went on the chair with the dough.

Nothing else. No clues. And clues I had to have if I ever wanted to smell sawdust and hear carnival barkers again. Otherwise I'd probably hear the soft plunk of that cyanide egg dropping into a jar of acid under the chair in a certain little room at San Quentin.

After that comes something that doesn't smell like petunias.

The loose-leaf calendar on the bedside table stared me right in the face. It said November 16.

This was November 15.

Somebody had torn off the top leaf— maybe because of writing on it, I thought.

Looking close you could see the impress of pencil marks. I dipped my fingers in a dirty ashtray and smudged them across the calendar. Now the pencil impress appeared in pale lines.

"Wishing you a happy and discreet fourth anniversary," somebody had written on the calendar leaf for November 15.

I tore off the smudged November 16 leaf, put it in the billfold, and went to the bathroom to wash my hands.

Seen in the mirror above the bowl, James Melton, broker, looked as if he'd been through the mill. Too much of the whites of his eyes showed. A tight pucker of lines on his forehead told how hard he was thinking.

I shut my eyes, drew a finger down slowly from the hairline to the bridge of my nose. An old Swiss actress taught me that trick.

Then I dried my hands and went back out to the living room.

Doug Drake hoisted his lean length from a chair. Mary O'Quinn got up, too. She looked cool, sure of the armored front she put up against Hollywood.

"Ready?" Doug Drake asked.

"All set," I said.

I would have said it the same way to the hangman . . .

WE HIT the party with a splash like three raindrops getting hep to Niagara Falls. Nobody paid us any attention.

The long barbecue tables stood under leafy green walnut trees, backed up in a corner angle of the high, white, brick wall that surrounded the estate.

A whole quarter of beef sizzled over olive-wood coals in a pit dug in the lawn. You could smell its juices dripping on the red coals and going up as steam.

The biggest and noisiest part of the crowd eddied around the table of drinks where a butler handed out booze.

Doug Drake hauled me over to the butler, got me a Manhattan, introduced me to a clacking, skinny, blonde woman. Then he vanished from my ken.

"I'm the Martha Hayes of Hayes Real Estate and Rentals, Mr. Melton!" she shrieked. "Why, you don't look at all like the charcoal sketch of you I hung in the master bedroom!"

I choked on my Manhattan. "What?" I sputtered. "Oh, that sketch—why?"

"I hope everything suits you, Mr. Melton!" she cooed excitedly. "I tried so hard to get everything just as your letter of instructions said. Even down to the recipe for drinks you sent!"

"Thanks, that's wonderful," I told her, with a strange, sinking feeling in my gizzard. I shook her off and she vanished into the human whirlpool.

My finger crooked at the butler got him away from the table of drinks for a minute. "Who's giving this party?" I whispered.

He looked at me with a dead-and-buried gleam of amusement in his eye. "Why you are, Mr. Melton, of course!"

I clutched the edge of the table for support. "Will you repeat that?" I gulped.

"It's a housewarming party, Mr. Melton," the butler explained. "Oh, you'll get used to Hollywood, sir. It just takes a little time."

I ran my finger around the inside of my collar. "I'm beginning to believe that."

"Do the cocktails meet your approval, sir? I followed to the letter the recipe you sent on."

He patted his pocket. It gave me an idea. "Let's see it," I demanded.

He fished forth a draggled leather and handed me a piece of paper. I stuffed the scrap in my pocket. "Thanks. Now which way is the master bedroom?"

He glanced at the long, low California ranch-house at the end of the lawn. "Through the living room, first on your right, then last on the left, sir," he told me.

A cowboy musician was wrestling with a bull fiddle twice his size near the barbecue tables. A couple of other musicians in western togs wandered about as I crossed the lawn to burgle my own house. An uneasy hunch that Liscomb might be somewhere in the offing intruded itself, but I didn't have time to worry about that.

A record player boomed soft swing for three or four couples dancing in the living room. I went right on through, first door on the right, last on the left, and found the master bedroom.

There on the wall, looking me right in

the optics hung a portrait of a face I'd seen before. Dark eyes, curly hair, everything but the blue-rimmed bullet hole in front of the red mush of brains and blood behind.

I reached for it. It was just a simple, casual charcoal sketch signed "James Melton by Tony Wheeler," but to me it could be deadly as a cobra.

If a shrewd eye got a gander at this sketch before I could hide it . . .

I had my hands on the frame when a woman's voice spoke quietly, behind me. "No," she said.

I spun around. Mary O'Quinn stood there with a nasty little blue-steel .25 automatic leveled at my tum-tum.

She swung the hall door shut. "You handle the part well," she said in cool tones. "Who are you? You're not Melton."

"I don't know what you mean," I said with offended dignity. "And how dare you brandish a gun in my—"

"Relax. I know a god job of acting when I see it." She kept the muzzle steady. "Now do you talk to me or to the police?"

A CARNIVAL shill has to add up human nature in a flash. Mary O'Quinn wore armor. From the toes of her trim little shoes to the top of her smooth chestnut head, where the first threads of grey showed, she was a skeptic.

But deep down in her eyes, where Hollywood couldn't get at it, I saw the hunger you can find in a tough little pavement Arab's eyes. It's the hunger to believe, just once, in Santa Claus.

I gambled everything on that look in her Irish blue eyes. Leading off with Leecomb's reefer jag and methods of coaxing, I gave her a quick picture of the setup.

When I finished the muzzle of the .25 was wavering. "That's all, I guess," I added brokenly. "There's a phone over there on the table if you want to call the—"

"Cut the corn," she broke in. The snub-nosed automatic vanished into her brown suede purse. The purse snapped shut. "All right. You've got a break. What are you going to do with it?"

With a sigh of relief that came all the way from the soles of my shoes, I hauled out the cocktail recipe in James Melton's handwriting, which I had hijacked from the butler. "Here's my first real lead," I told her.

We spread the smudged calendar leaf for November 16 I'd stashed in my bill-fold beside the recipe and compared the handwriting. "His, all right, in both cases," I opined.

"What of it?"

"It means Melton sent somebody a message on a calendar leaf for today, November 15. Wished them a 'happy and discreet fourth anniversary.'"

"I don't see how that proves—" she began.

"It doesn't, yet. But it's going to," I told her. "Look."

I fumbled through the pockets of Melton's suit until I found the envelope with the key in it, shook the key out into my palm. "Somewhere around here there's a mighty interesting skeleton in a family closet. The sooner it's aired out, the sooner I can quit being a dead broker and go back to being a live carnival shill."

"I'll tag along," Mary O'Quinn remarked, "just to make sure nobody crosses you up on that last item."

Leaving the charcoal sketch of the late lamented James Melton under the bed, we made a quick tour of the house, ending up in the living room.

"Not a locked door in the place," I said grimly. "If I don't find . . ."

The words died unspoken as my blood turned to ice water. One of the swing fanciers in the living room had switched the radio over to the broadcast side. A radio voice was babbling about a murder, a swell new, Hollywood murder.

I stood there frozen, listening to the words that would drop the deadfall on my neck.

Not Mary O'Quinn. She eased up alongside the radio and pressed the right button, clicked the news voice off.

She came back. "That means you've only got minutes, now," she whispered. "The police will trace you here by phoning Doug Drake's studio and finding out where he is."

We stepped out the front door. The sun had gone. Dusk crept in under the leafy walnut trees to mix with the smell of wood smoke. Up in the blue sky a little cloud the size of a baby's shirt tail turned pink.

You couldn't ask anything better, but the way I felt I might as well have been alone on a narrow steel girder, thirty floors above the street, with a sleety February wind hunting the marrow of my bones.

One slip and good-by.

"Could be there's a locked door in the garage or servants' quarters upstairs," I said in a voice that surprised me it was so calm.

"I'll take the servants' quarters," Mary O'Quinn whispered quickly. "You take the garage. Hurry."

The garage doors were closed. I went around to the side, got in that way.

JUST as my fingers touched the light switch I spotted an orange dot in the darkness and got a whiff of marijuana. The lights clicked on.

That was a mistake. Liscomb sat there on an apple box in his black and orange shirt and white sombrero, looking at me. He was still on the muggles, but he'd graduated from reefers. He smoked a king-sized torpedo, now.

"Billy boy!" he whispered.

The green flickers in his snaky eyes were king-sized now, too. Ropy saliva hung on his teeth when he grinned at me.

I backed toward the door, fumbling for the light button. Liscomb's fancy, high-heeled boots gritted on the floor as he got up off the apple box stretching like a big sleepy cat.

The marijuana saved me. His timing was shot. I snapped off the lights, slid out, slamming the door, just as his two hundred pounds of crazy muscle crashed against it. Inside I could hear him fumbling around, hunting the knob.

Mary O'Quinn met me on the lawn while I was still cursing my knees for going shaky on me. "Nothing upstairs," she reported.

"Nothing downstairs either." I didn't tell her about Liscomb.

Her eyes narrowed. "Have you asked that real estate woman, Martha Hayes, about this? She handled the deal for Melton, you know. Even to furnishing the place and throwing this housewarming."

"It's worth a try," I admitted.

We cornered the blonde Hayes dame against a table. I hauled out the envelope with the key in it. "Er, uh, Mrs. Hayes. I find there's a key I don't quite place. Is there something locked up?"

"Oh, don't you recall?" she yelped. "The estate-keeper's lodge. You gave strict orders on the telephone when you leased the place just four months ago today. You have the only key."

Mary O'Quinn's eyes met mine as we moved out of the crowd. "Four months ago today!" she whispered.

"Wishing you a happy and discreet fourth anniversary," I mused. "Well that's one way of putting it."

"The papers," she said quickly. "The newspapers. If we could get hold of the L. A. papers for—let's see—"

"Last July 15th."

"Right," she nodded. "I noticed piles of salvage papers on the curbs all along the street when we drove up. I'm going to bribe the neighborhood kids to dig for July 15 copies!"

She started away, stopped, looked at

me like a worried cat with an extra kitten. "I'll be O.K.," I told her. She smiled and went on.

I wasn't scared. My knees trembled like a bridegroom's, my tongue nailed itself to the roof of my mouth, but I wasn't scared.

I'd always wanted to stroll about my own broad acres in the cool of the evening, hadn't I? And now I was doing it, wasn't I? Sure.

The estate-keeper's lodge, a stucco box with living quarters and garage in one unit, stood off by itself behind a cypress edge.

The windows had been boarded up. The whole place was locked tighter than a drum. I had to go round it twice before I found a lock my key fitted. My shoes gritted on gravel at every step.

I turned the key until it clicked, pushed the door open just wide enough to squeeze in. The beating of my heart seemed to echo in the musty darkness.

After a couple of centuries of fumbling I found the light switch. The car, a light convertible, stood there under a canvas hood. I knew what I'd find when I looked at the radiator grill. But I forced my hands to take hold of the canvas just the same and lift.

Ten seconds was enough. I dropped the canvas again. My stomach writhed away from my belt buckle. I couldn't get out of the musty smelling place quick enough.

It happened just as I stumbled across the door sill. A pencil of orange fire jetted from the cypress hedge. At the same time something hot fanned my neck, and the flat sharp crack of the shot echoed off the wall.

I fell forward, rolling on the gravel, while footsteps faded on the other side of the hedge.

I got up, dusted off James Melton's tailored pants, and went back to the party. I wasn't scared any more, just tired. I wanted to get the dirty job over with.

MARY O'QUINN met me near the tables, where the crowd had thinned a little. "I got the papers, look out for cops!" she said in one breath, nudging me.

The two city dicks who'd nearly nabbed me at the Glenashiel Arms had crashed the party. I saw them nosing through the crowd.

"Tell the butler to throw food and drinks into them," I whispered. "I know cops. If I keep in plain sight they'll figure they can eat first and pinch me later."

Liscomb's white sombrero hovered in the shadows. I heard the thunk of his guitar. He'd spotted me.

At the table nearest the angle of the high wall I found a seat in full view of the crowd. Mary O'Quinn tossed some split kindling on the blaze in the fireplace built into the wall and settled down beside me. "What did you find in the estate-keeper's lodge?" she queried.

"Never mind," I countered. "See what hit-run cases the city had in the early morning hours of the fifteenth of July. Look in the evening editions."

She rattled through the papers. "War workers on Sunset, youth in Van Nuys, seventy-year-old woman killed on Caluenga."

"Any other old people?"

"No."

"Then that's the one."

I stood up on the bench. "Ladies and gentlemen!" I called.

Everyone looked up, but the noise of eating, drinking, and chit-chat went on.

"Mr. James Melton regrets he cannot chaw beef with you tonight," I informed them. "He had a date with a slab in the morgue!"

That got them. In the silence you could have heard a pin drop. In the background Liscomb's guitar twunked out *Red River Valley* faintly. He was there, waiting.

"Mr. James Melton," I said, looking down the double row of faces that the firelight showed me. "Mr. James Melton wasn't quite the newcomer he pretended to be. He made a trip out here to the Coast just four months ago. He went for a ride with a pal, I believe. They had an accident—drove off and left an old lady dead in the middle of the street."

The guitar stayed in the background, like a soft accompaniment. I was glad Doug Drake and the two city dicks sat between me and Liscomb.

I gave them the rest of it. "That night James Melton let a badly frightened pal out and drove his car away to hide it.

"He hid the car so well the frightened pal never found it. A couple of days ago Mr. James Melton came back to Hollywood, tried blackmailing the old pal, and got paid off with a lead slug."

The firelight played on tense faces. Liscomb's guitar never faltered. I had the reefer-whacky thug hanging on every word.

"So far so good," I remarked cheerfully. "But the scared pal who knocked off Mr. Melton had to have a sucker. So he laid a trap. The sucker was told to come to the Glenashiel Arms at four twenty-eight. The minute he buzzed from the foyer, the scared pal burned Melton down and kited, leaving the sucker to hold the bag."

"I was that sucker, ladies and gents. But the killer laid the trap for somebody else!"

A guitar string snapped, loud as a shot in the silence.

Doug Drake cracked. He was on his feet, shaking like a leaf, the clean-cut lines of his handsome face blurred now, and twisted, in the red firelight. A flat automatic lay in his hand.

"Damn you!" he gasped. "You—you've ruined me!"

A harsh, choked voice cut in. "No, I'm gonna do that! Frame me, would you? Why you—"

Liscomb towered above Drake from behind, reached out and clamped a big handful of steel fingers on his shoulder.

Doug Drake, his handsome face twisted in a snarl, turned and triggered the automatic. One, two, three four times he smashed lead through Liscomb's chest before the city dicks could reach him.

THE clicking of the taximeter sounded like music to my ears as we topped a hill and Hollywood's lights spread out below us. I was seeing Mary O'Quinn home. In my pocket was a signed contract, hot off the stove. "You really think I can get a few bit parts in the flickers?" I asked for the umteenth time.

"I know it," she assured me. "Now will you tell me something? How did you know the killer was Doug Drake?"

"Remember the charcoal sketch of Melton?"

"Yes. In the master bedroom."

"It was signed 'Tony Wheeler' and you told me yourself earlier that Drake's real name had been Anthony Wheeler. He knew James Melton long before either of them ever came to Hollywood."

"Go on, don't stop there."

"If he knew the real James Melton, why didn't he call my bluff? Only one answer to that, 'e expected to find his partner, Liscomb, in the trap. Maybe he thought Liscomb would shoot it out with the cops and get rubbed.

"When he found me, he knew there'd be two of us alive to stand our word against his in court. So he had to lie low until he could see how the cards would fall. Of course he's the one who took a shot at me tonight when I found the hidden car."

I looked at her. "Now you tell me something."

"What?"

"How did you know I was an actor?"

Mary O'Quinn laughed. "It's not in the contract," she told me, "but I'm going to darn those holes in your socks."

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Last One Dead Is An Old Maid!

"Alvin Hinkey" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

D The only witness to the bump-off of a slick chick from the Gay Nineties was her parrot. And the old bird wasn't talking—until Gotham's goofiest sleuth made polly want a hacker.

Sgt. Louis Garfunkle,
c/o Postmaster,
New York, N. Y.

D EAR LOUIE:
I finally got your Xmas card, but by the looks of it I would think you were in Paree and not in an Eye-talian town. The censor wrote "Tsk-tsk" on it.

Eva got all excited the other night when I took her to a newsreel, Louie. There was pictures of action where you

are supposed to be. All at once Eva grabs me like I am the last bus out and says, "There's Louie!" Then we see a G.I. push you over, Louie, and what does it turn out to be but a gargoyle which fell off a church.

Eva was disappointed. She still is not convinced as she says she remembers you standing up unconscious many a time after drinkin' the prune wine you used to make. That was murder, that stuff, which reminds me of one I solved, only who got the credit but Hambone Noonan.

Louie, two old hermitesses lived in an old brownstone downtown. It was a very fashionable dump in the days when Jim Brady used to blow his breath on his diamonds. Now it is sandwiched between an undertaking parlor and an apartment house that isn't finished. The sisters are named Anastasia and Isolde Furbish. Anastasia gets knocked off one night by a prowler, and Isolde is shocked loose from her senses.

Nine o'clock the next morning me and Noonan arrive at the brownstone with some other cops. A patrolman says he discovered the crime. Every morning he said, he looked in the basement window to see if the two old dollars were up, as they asked him to. They said they always got up at eight-thirty on the dot. If they ever missed, to look for trouble. The beat walker says he got in the back window.

"They never used the top floors," the cop says. "They lived in the basement always, an' they only went out once a week or so for stuff at a delicatessen on the corner. I bet I know the motive. These old babes generally sew about eighty grand in their skirts or hide it in a mattress."

"That's enough for now," Noonan says to the patrolman. "It's our business to solve this crime, not yours."

Anastasia is reclining near a horse-chair sofa and her noggin had been tapped too diligently with a hard object of some kind. Anastasia is dressed for an afternoon tea of the vintage of 1895 or thereabouts. She has on a high lace collar and high buttoned shoes.

Neither is Isolde a bobby-sox babe. Isolde is sitting in a chair like she belonged in a wax museum. No matter how hard Hambone yells at her, she does not answer him.

"Look," I says. "I don't wish to intrude too much, but this doll has seen more than just a ginger cookie broke in half. She has been through more than just the Gay Nineties. Give her a chance to git her vocal cords unshocked."

The medical examiner assures us that Anastasia has been passé for nearly eight hours. "I would say the criminal entered this house just as the women were preparing to retire, as you can see their old flannel nighties are draped over the bed. And Miss Furbish there has one shoe off."

"They always retired around midnight," the cop on the beat says. "They both had insomnia."

Hambone paws his face and gets very testy. "Awright, Alvin," he snaps at me. "Why do they need us, huh? They even know maybe what kind of liniment they used for their sciatica, and how many

spoons of sugar they put in their pekoe. Why do you think they made us detectives?"

"I won't answer that one," the cop says.

"It was a handy murder," I observe. "We can just move the remains next door—"

"**A**LVIN, we must find out how the murderer broke in," Noonan says. "This window here has been jimmied. We'll take a photo of it, an' maybe a moulage—"

"The patrolman got through that way, remember, Hambone?" I says. "Look, there are fire escapes running along the back of these ol' brownstones. We should most likely go up there on the next floor an' look about."

"I was just goin' to," Hambone says. "Come on, Alvin."

It is a creepy place on the next floor, Louie. Even Lugosi or Karloff would not have followed me and Noonan into the old parlor. Cobwebs kiss us and vampires would have held their noses because of the smells. There is old rotting cloth covering the ancient furniture, and it is weighted down with dust. Sunlight seeps through the little cracks in the drawn shades and crawls over the carpet.

"Hambone!" I says quick. The flatfoot jumps a foot off the floor.

"Don't you dast do that just once more, Alvin—or—or—I'll—"

"I heard somethin'," I says.

"I didn't, or I would be a block away by now," Noonan gulps out. "Oh, it was just mice of course."

"I never heard a mouse talk bass or baritone," I says. "Somethin' rustled too."

"Stop scarin' me, Alvin. Let's git a look at the back winders to make sure. Then we'll git out of here. I don't believe in ghosts, but I am awful scared of 'em."

"Why, this window catch has been busted! It has been jimmied, Alvin. This is how the murderer got in. I—"

"Listen," I says, holding my breath as long as I dared without becoming a corpse myself.

I know Hambone heard it this time. It is a sound that lifts my hat right off my scalp and turns my legs to rubber bands. It is a scraping and croaking and rustling sound. I was sure once I heard a voice say, "Help, shipmates!"

"You hear what I do, Alvin?" Hambone says and hugs me.

"I didn't know you cared," I says sourly. "If you dast kiss me, Hambone, I'll—well, I am goin' out there an' see what it is. We got to face it sooner or later, Hambone. Git hold of yourself an' not me."

We tippy-toe out into the dark corridor. I snap on a flash and play it around. There in a corner is a parrot looking up at me with his right eye cocked. There are some loose feathers on the floor. One of the parrot's wings looked as if it had stopped some flak over Hamburg. The bird yaps at us, and I was sure it asked us if the tornado was over.

"Huh," Hambone says. "A wicked lookin' bird. You understand parrots, Alvin?"

"My aunt had one once. I still have a scar on my—never mind," I says. "I'll see what I can do. It looks like it doubled for a watchdog, and the dishonest character tangled with it. Look, there is blood on its beak, an' I bet there is stains on its claws. We'll let the boys at the lab—"

"Let's go down an' see if Isolde is speakin' to us," Hambone says.

Isolde Furbish is mumbling a little when we return to the basement. The parrot is on my shoulder and nibbling at my ear.

"Oh, you have Horatius," Isolde says quite thinly.

"He put up quite a battle at the bridge," I says.

"He tried to save us. It always sat on a perch out there in the second hallway," the old recluse says. "We couldn't bear to keep him in a cage."

"Awright," Hambone says. "One thing we got to know. Did you an' your sister have any relatives you knew was left alive?"

Isolde takes another whiff at a bottle of smelling salts. "Just one. Our late brother Gladstone's son, a nephew named Humbert. He lives out in Hohokus. Haven't seen him for seven years, thank heaven."

"Er—how much scratch did you an' your sister have in your—wherever you kept it, Miss Furbish?"

"Almost forty thousand dollars," Isolde says. "The robber took it, Anastasia's petticoat an' all. Oh, the shame of it."

"I'll say it is a shame losing forty thousand fish," I says.

"Be more polite, Alvin," Hambone chides. "This looks pretty plain to me. Here is a parrot who clawed somebody, maybe Humbert Furbish. Horatius here sure don't have hummin' bird's claws. He must of left his trade mark on the assassin. There is blood here on this newspaper on the floor. We will arrest your nephew, Mrs.—pardon me—Miss Furbish."

"Aren't you bein' a little hasty, Hambone?" I ask.

"Oh, I guess you'd want to make a big thing out of it, Alvin. An intrinsic

case hard to solve, huh? Most of them happen only in books," Noonan says. "We will go to Hohokus."

"I put Horatius on the back of a chair, Miss Furbish," I says. "I'd git a vet to look at him soon as he looks a little groggy yet."

HUMBERT FURBISH lives in an old house on a side street in the Jersey town. The shack has not seen paint since Germany hated war. We wade through grass and weeds to the front door.

"It looks like hermititis runs in the Furbishes," I comment. "You think he's in?"

"Smoke is comin' out the chimney," Hambone says. "Can mice cook?"

"That is not so funny," I sniff.

Hambone bangs on the door, and two shingles fall off the roof. A window blind comes loose and nearly brains me. "You are not knocking on the door of a tomb," I says.

Humbert comes out. He is a watery-eyed citizen with a beard, although he can't be over forty-five. He wears baggy pants with patches on the knees and old slippers with his toes showing through.

"What you want?" Humbert asks.

"You," Noonan says. "Git inside there an' don't resist. We are goin' to search this dump for forty grand. I bet you buried the petticoat, huh?"

"Huh?" Humbert squeaks. "You must be crazy."

"You're warm," I says and Hambone glares at me, Louie.

"Awright, we can't waste our time," Hambone starts when we are in Humbert's parlor. "There may be other crimes to solve across the river. You got two aunts named Anastasia an' Rissole, ain't you?"

"You mean Anastasia an'—"

"Sure," I says impatiently. "Did you or did you not sneak across the Hudson last night, enter your aunties' domicile unlawfully, knock off one of them, an' lift the poke they had garnered all these years—the poke Morgenthau never got wise to."

"What's he sayin'?" Humbert asks Noonan.

"You know darned well," Noonan replies. "We are accusin' you of murder and robbery and illegal entry and—where did you get those deep scratches on your arm, Humbert Furbish? Look, Alvin."

"Look," Humbert says. "I got a tomcat that turned on me this mornin'. Now you git out of here an' let me alone."

"Fancy, Alvin! He wants to be alone like he was Mr. Garbo or somebody," Hambone snorts and takes out his police Roscoe. "A likely story. Show us the

tomcat, Humbert! An' stand aside while we ransack this joint for the moolah. Nowadays nobody can eat or pay rent without workin'. He must live by crooked means, Alvin."

"Yeah, where is the tomcat?" I ask Humbert.

"After what he did to me," Humbert says. "I took more'n enough from that cat. I took him over to Saddle River an' threw him in. Weighed the cuss down with rocks. Be an awful job to find it."

"You beast!" I says. "Your only alibi an' you—"

"How did I know one of my aunts was murdered when I tossed the cat in the drink?" Humbert howls. "Sure I got nearly twenty thousan' dollars in my mattress upstairs, but it was earned honest. I saved my money and spent nothin' so's I could retire. Thrift runs in the Furbish fam'lies. They all hated banks. Don't you dast touch my money, you fiends!"

Well, Louie, we cut Humbert's mattress open and found the hoarded legal tender. Who wouldn't have suspected the jerk? He can't show us the tomcat that gouged him. He has a beat suit in his boudoir; admits he was across the Hudson the night before, but won't tell us where he was and why. We try and make him tell where he hid the other half of the purloined moolah, but he acts dumb about it all.

"Let's take a ride, Humbert," Hambone Noonan says. "Git into your blue serge there as you will want to look nice for the grill room."

"It is an outrage," Humbert yelps. "Just because I drowned a tomcat an' can't—where is the democracy they—?"

WELL, the case builds up against Humbert while we were in Hohokus. Hard Hat Hafey and another cop get prints off the back of a chair in the basement apartment of the sisters Furbish. When we compare Humbert's prints with them they match. Humbert then confesses he was in the brownstone house the night of the murder.

"I sneaked in to get somethin' that belonged to me and that they wouldn't never give to me," Furbish says. "My pa left it to me in his will. A silver shavin' mug with a big F on it. It had sedimental value and I—"

"Oh, brother!" Hambone says and makes the walls of the grill room, the third degree salon, shake. "I have heard stuff on the radio you could believe more. Well, it looks like you are booked with a murder rap, Humbert. How much bail can you put up?"

"He don't git any bail," the D.A. says.

"This is too much of a cold-blooded murderer. Toss him into a cell."

We turn the dough we found in Furbish's house over to the D.A. Me and Hambone go down and see Isolde and tell her she can at least live half as well as before anyway.

"So it was Humbert?" Isolde says. She is alone now, so it looks like half the dough will see her through. Anastasia is being tidied in the mortician's next door.

Hambone hints at some kind of reward, Louie. You know him! So the bereaved old spinster says for us to wait here. She goes into the next room and comes out with a stereopticon that delighted your grandpa way back. She says it is for Hambone for exposing the guilty citizen. It serves the fathead right.

Two hours later we forget the Furbish case, until the trial, at least. I tell Hambone it is going to look funny, Humbert's lawyer draggin' the Saddle River for a defunct tomcat.

"Well, that is his only chance, Alvin," Hambone snickers.

Next afternoon I happen to be in the neighborhood where the rub-out took place, so I called to see how Isolde and Horatius were getting along. Isolde says Horatius is fine at the moment, but that he had a bad spell the night before.

"He got to choking, Mr. Hinkey," Isolde Furbish says, sipping at a cup of tea. "I sent for the veterinary and he had quite a time with Horatius. I've heard of cats getting a ball of fur in their stummicks, but not a parrot getting some yarn in his throat."

"What?" I asks.

"Why, yes. The doctor removed it after a while. I kept it."

Isolde shows me some dark blue yarn. Quite a chunk of it. "Where would he git a bite of a sweater?" I want to know. "You or your late sister been knittin' for the Red Cross?"

"No, Mr. Hinkey. It was too much for us. We saved fat and old papers though. Isn't the war just terrible?"

"Worse'n that," I says. I wonder then if Humbert Furbish owned a blue sweater. I decides to call up Hambone. I get him finally in Tony Buffo's tavern on Canal Street.

"Hambone, I just been to see Miss Furbish. She—but let me talk. I was not tryin' to chisel a reward out of her—I was just—listen, Hambone! Split with you or you'll what—? Look, you cabbage-head, I am trying to tell you—oh, nuts."

I hang up. What is the sense of trying to work with the lug? I make up my mind to go out to Hohokus that very evening, which I do.

I enter Humbert Furbish's deserted mansion by a rear window and step right into a plate of something squishy. I slip on it and sit right down in a big saucer of milk. Then I snap on the flashlight. I look at what was to have been a mouse-chaser's breakfast or lunch or dinner.

"Why, Humbert must have owned a tomcat," I says. Could it be we had mis-judged the character and lifted his bank-roll which might have belonged to him anyway? I start sweating, Louie.

It is a blue sweater I am looking for. I search the house top and bottom for two hours and cannot find a blue sweater in Humbert's abbreviated wardrobe.

When I get back to the big town, I says to myself you had better call Hambone Noonan. I do and Hambone happens to be home. "This is Alvin," I says. "Hambone, I—"

"Don't talk to me, stinker!" Noonan says and hangs up.

"Awright, smart Aleck, if that is the way you want it," I snap at the dead phone. "Go on thinkin' Humbert is guilty!"

What was I sayin', Louie?

THREE days pass. I still do not get up the courage to tell anybody about the yarn that Horatius nearly choked on. How would you like to have gone into the D.A., Louie, and said:

"I think somebody besides Humbert Furbish liquidated Anastasia Furbish and all you have to do is find a blue sweater which was knitted with yarn like what the vet found in the parrot's trachea." The D.A. would have sent me over to Bellevue, and not for a hypo.

Well, it was one afternoon when who comes into headquarters but a lawyer named Sidney Hooze. He comes into the backroom where the detectives hang out. He looks like he has gone through all the Pacific islands with the U. S. Army.

"Well, Hoozy," Hambone says. "What crook are you figurin' on gittin' a detainer fee on, huh? What's the matter, somebody steal your last sack of makin's?"

"Aw, I git the worst breaks," Sidney gripes. "Here I got me a cinch case. A dame comes to me and asks does she have a case. I go and look the case over. It's a cinch lawsuit for her husband and should net about five grand in damages. I tells the babe it is a pushover.

"Then the next day which is today she comes and says her husband don't care to sue as after all he likes his neighbor. What a break. The guy gits a rare disease because of his neighbor having a pet cracker punisher. What does he contract but *psittacosis*. It could be fatal, an'

then she'll have to sue. But it'll be my luck the jerk lives."

I am alone a few seconds later, when all of a sudden I nearly faint. I make a sound like you hear when you pull the plug out of a sink drain, Louie. Oh, I nearly muffed it. A disease from parrots! If a citizen was gouged by the talons of a big baby like Horatius—

I run out and catch Sidney Hooze just as the lawyer is getting into his sedan. "Hey, what is the name of the character who has psit—whatever osis it is, Sid. I got a reason to ask."

"Wait now," Hooze says. "Yeah, the name is Mrs. Rudolph Smootzig. She hasn't got it. Her husband has, Alvin. It is a cinch case as the doctor's bills alone should run up—what makes guys so dumb when they can make easy a couple of grand after my fee—"

"I wouldn't know," I says. I sit down on the curb and try to remember where I saw a name like that. Just as Hooze throws the jalopy in gear, I yelp:

"What does this Smootzig do?"

"He runs a store of some kind," the lawyer says and then drives off.

"Smootzig," I says. "Smootzig!" Then it comes to me. I run back into the building and hunt down Hambone Noonan. Hambone is trying to borrow two bucks from Hard Hat, but Hard Hat is adamant. That means he won't loosen up.

"Hambone," I yelp. "I will loan you the two bucks, if you will just get off your knees an' come an' see me in private."

"Oh, you are a pal, Alvin," Noonan says. "What is the matter with you, though?"

"Huh? Humbert Furbish is as innocent as you are," I says. "I am going to prove it to you, and also take you with me to apprehend the real assassin. I have been killed almost three times now by forgetting to take you with me."

"It can't be," Hambone argues. "All the evidence—"

"Circumstantial," I says fast. "Humbert saved his dough, too, and lived like a ragbag to retire early. Let us look up a name in the phone book. We will go to the address an' clinch this murder case. Now I know why Mrs. Smootzig decided not to let her provider sue his neighbor."

"Huh?"

"I bet he wears a blue sweater an'—"

"Alvin Hinkey, you are nuts," Noonan says. "But I will go along with the gag. I'll tell the D. A. though if—"

"Oh, keep still," I snort. "Here it is. Rudolph P. Smootzig, 719½ Bleaker Street. Come along, Hambone. I hope the fever does not steal him away from the hot seat. Why, we should have known he'd know more about the Furbish dolls

than anybody. We'll take the bus, Hambone."

WE ARRIVE at the Smootzig flat just as an M. D. is leaving. "How's the patient?" I ask.

"Think he'll pull through. Had a narrow squeak, mister."

"He'll get another relapse," I says. "I mean those kind of ailments are in the laps of the gods, huh, Doc? I guess he is as well as can be suspected, huh?"

"Yeah. Don't excite him now."

"Not much," I says, and Hambone keeps scratching his noggin. "Let's go in."

"I would knock first," Noonan says. "We are not enterin' a washroom."

I knock and Mrs. Smootzig answers the door. She is a nifty looking blonde who would look like a million in a fur coat. She knows it, Louie, and also knows she is about to own one. "We are from an insurance company," I says. "Just want to ask Rudolph a question or two."

"Nuts!"

"Who said that?" Hambone gulps.

"Oh, it is just the parrot next door," the blonde says. I see she has a booklet on California in her hand.

We are shown into the bedroom. A character with a head as round as a bowling ball is propped up in bed and looks as healthy as the city garbage dump. Smootzig has close-cropped hair like a Kraut, and two little eyes the color of roofing slate. I inquire as to his state of health.

"What's it to you, Buster?" the citizen snarls. "Who did you say they was, Baby?"

"Insurance—"

"I was kiddin'," I says. "I am a cop. Where was you the night a doll named Anastasia Furbish was rubbed out? Was you in a house where you had to fight a parrot an' got scratched and got this psit—Physito—parrot fever?"

"Hambone, you ransack the joint for a blue sweater and see if it has been bitten by anything like a parrot. An' if you got scratches on your anatomy some place, Smootzig—well, there's nearly forty grand in this house or where you stashed it, you—"

"Get him, Babe!" the patient yelps. Mrs. Smootzig throws a very heavy water pitcher at Hambone. It grazes the big lug's skull. Now if Mrs. Smootzig had hit him anywhere else, Louis, Hambone would not have recovered so fast. He shakes his dome, rushes the dame, picks her up, and throws her out into the next room. He locks the door.

It is not very smart on Hambone's part not to have broke at least one of the doll's

legs as she comes in the room again via a fire escape with a Roscoe in her hand. She does this while Mr. Smootzig is firing at us from his sickbed, having foreseen a possible visit from the gendarmes.

Me and Noonan are barricaded behind a dresser we have turned over. But it is not made of good wood, and bullets are doing a nice job getting through it.

But for once one of us has brought artillery along. Hambone Noonan shoots an earring right off Mrs. Smootzig, taking a generous piece of earlobe with it. The doll screeches and fires blind. She comes close enough to her own hubby's dome with a slug to put him to sleep. The bullet also went through the crown of my hat on its way into a picture of Mrs. Smootzig's ma which is hanging on the wall.

"Quite a billiard shot," I yelps. "You give up, Madam, or we will have to ventilate your foundations, an' you know they are hard to git."

Mrs. Smootzig gives up and falls into the room. Her male partner recovers, picks up his marbles, but sees we have his Betsy.

"Oh, you jughead," he wails at his spouse. "If you hadn't gone an' asked about suin' the guy next door—awright, it is no mink coats, no diamon's, no ny-lons—"

"And soon no husband," I says in a very cold-blooded fashion. "Hambone, the only place Anastasia an' Isolde ever went to was the delicatessen. This vicious person kept askin' them questions.

"I bet he eased that brownstone well. It was Horatius he underestimated, though. Imagine, it gives him psit—parrot fever. Well, we will look for the blue sweater and the moolah and close the case."

We found all we wanted, Louie. Mrs. Smootzig did not know Rudy had knocked off the old babe, until he had to tell her so she would keep away from the lawyer, Sid Hooze.

"We sure solved this one pretty," Hambone says to me in front of the D. A.

"We? Uh-er-sure," I gulp.

Well, you keep punchin' over there, Louie. We will stick right in your corner until the last round. Even my Uncle Putney give blood at the bank las' time, but they found they could not use it as it tested one hundred proof like Old Crow. It started to ferment quick.

Eva went out with a Seabee a couple of nights back. She had to pay a bistro bill of seven bucks as the tar left his wallet in New Caledonia. Did that babe git stung?

Hurry back, Louie. As ever,
Alvin

Before he could reap the rewards of police department glory, ex-Marine Johnny Tobin had to make a . . .

Tarawa Payoff

By H. Wolff Salz



THE pain-redened fog lifted from his eyes slowly. Lying on his back, he stared up at towering dark buildings and thought, "What the hell are brick warehouses doing on Tarawa?"

His hands groped out beside him and he thought, "What's a concrete sidewalk doing where hot sands ought to be?"

The pain, though—the numbing pain that sliced upward from his hip to the base of his skull, and the wet sticky feel of leaking blood under him—that was unchanged.

He remembered slowly, a little incredulously, like reality probing tentative fingers into a nightmare. Tarawa and the hunk of Jap shrapnel in his hip were five months behind him. This was the States, and he was back on the force, where he'd been before the Marines. Before Guadalcanal, New Guinea, Tarawa.

No sense to it. Why was he stretched on his back staring at the stars? Why the fire in his hip? The leaking blood? Why was his head going around like a Fourth-of-July pinwheel?

Take it easy, Johnny Tobin. Take it easy.

Remember Gin-Eye Macklin? They had told Johnny about Corporal Wesley "Gin-Eye" Macklin when he woke up on the hospital ship steaming back to Hawaii. Johnny would have bled to death where he fell on the beach, if Corporal Gin-Eye hadn't scuttled out into the open in the face of blistering machine-gur fire and dragged Johnny back into the foxhole.

You never did thank Gin-Eye for that little service.

What's the connection with now? With city sidewalks and dark warehouses? With the knifing pain in his hip and his head going around like a B-24 prop?

Scraps of memory penetrated the fog of pain like fast-moving scenes through a rain-drenched train window. Ruth. She hadn't wanted to marry him. No, that wasn't right. She had wanted him to get

a cushy office job. "Weren't the foxholes and jungles and Japs enough excitement for you? Must you live your whole life doing a job where you'd never know when some rat's bullet will reach out for you in the dark?"

They had compromised. If he became a sergeant in six months she'd marry him. "If you get the promotion," she'd agreed, "I'll at least know there's more of a future for you on the force than a lifetime of pounding pavements."

What's the connection with Corporal Gin-Eye, Johnny?

If his head weren't going around so fast maybe he could think. Corporal Gin-Eye Macklin. He was a hero, coming home. The Congressional Medal. Something about knocking off forty monkeys and bringing a Jap general back alive. It was all in the newspapers. Corporal Gin-Eye was a local boy. He got a big spread, like he deserved.

JOHNNY TOBIN sat up suddenly. His lungs emptied of air in a gasp of agony as pain blitzed his nerves.

The body was still there, awkward, lifeless, its middle-aged face white in the pale glow of the street lamp at the mouth of the alley, exactly as it had been before Johnny passed out. Like the words in the song, it all came back to him now.

He'd been patrolling along quiet, respectable Parkmoor Place when the man darted from the dark house and ran for a car. The second man who came from the house was wounded, shot in the shoulder. He had blurted out the details to Johnny. He'd come home late with his wife and discovered the crook robbing his wall safe. The crook had fired one shot and escaped without the loot.

But he had left an apple core in the safe.

Johnny had used the house owner's roadster in the wild chase. Dark streets, screaming tires, around corners on two wheels, and finally to this river warehouse district.

Johnny had known who the crook was. The Apple Eater. The man who had robbed a hundred wealthy homes and

always left his queer signature behind. An apple core. The man whose long series of jewel thefts had the top men on the force tearing their hair. And the commissioner had promised a promotion to the man who ended the Apple Eater's career.

He remembered thinking, as he sent a slug into the fleeing car's rear tire, *This guy's for you, Ruth, for the promotion the commissioner promised, and the wedding bells and orange blossoms.*

It all came back to him now—with a wrench that twisted his heart and a lump that choked his throat. The leap out of the roadster as the fleeing sedan crashed into a store window. His quick shots as the Apple Eater jumped out of his car and darted for the alley. The crook's answering shots, and the slug that knifed into his thigh and crumpled him to the sidewalk. Then his last shot that brought the crook down like a clay pigeon.

The Apple Eater was dead when Johnny reached his side, from a slug that had gone through his heart.

Johnny remembered the slug. Biting his lips against the pain that cut through his body, he crawled towards it, scooped it up and went back to the dead man's side. From the distance came the wail of sirens.

Johnny fought off the dizziness that returned with his movements. He wrenched the crook's gun from the stiffening fingers and laid his own gun on the cold hand. Painfully, he groped across the sidewalk, found the lip of the sewer at the curb and tossed the dead man's revolver in. The death slug from his own gun followed it.

The sirens were approaching fast. He inched back to the lifeless body, fumbled through the dead man's pockets. Nothing

incriminating. Only one thing left to do before the enveloping fog overwhelmed him. The wallet and letter that still lay on the sidewalk beside the body had to be returned to the dead man's pocket.

The wallet with the identification card that said, *Lester R. Macklin*. And the V-mail letter that had traveled halfway around the world from the South Pacific. The letter that started, *Dear Pop* and was signed, *Gin-Eye*.

Corporal Gin-Eye Macklin, who was following his letter home as a hero.

Two squad cars arrived at the same time. Somebody put an arm around Johnny, held him up.

Johnny heard himself talking, in a voice that sounded as if it came from a tomb. "The Apple Eater . . . chased him . . . shot his tire. He ran to alley. I followed. He got me. That man . . . lying there . . . was walking by . . . tried to help me . . . took my gun . . . started to chase Apple Eater. Apple Eater shot and killed him. Got away."

He heard a gruff voice growl, "Practically had the Apple Eater in his hands and let him get away! How do you like that!"

Another voice said, "You mean how'll the commissioner like that!"

The first voice said, "This dead guy, here. He sure had guts, grabbing Tobin's gun and going after the Apple Eater. Plenty guts! Like a hero, if you ask me."

Somebody was helping Johnny to his feet. A tourniquet had been tied around his thigh. They were helping him towards a squad car. There was a blur in front of his eyes. The spinning wouldn't stop. What was it he wanted to say to the dead man? He couldn't seem to think.

"That was for Gin-Eye," he murmured. "For services rendered."



Murder's Sure Substitute



Mystery Novelet

By
Stewart
Toland

As an involuntary impostor, Lee Pommer fell heir to a thirty million dollar secret. But when the price of that legacy came due, Pommer would have no cash substitute to make the payment—for the price was premeditated murder.

ENSIGN LEE POMMER slipped gingerly out of the sedan, grinned. "Thanks for the lift, neighbor. It sure was nice riding."

That was all he had to say out loud, standing here in God's country, breathing gas fumes and soot; with gum wrappers and butts and spit under his feet; laughter and whistles and horns crowding his ears. Times Square. Heaven. A million miles, a million hellish years from France. He didn't forget to say a little prayer deep down inside for that.

He was in uniform, Navy colors off an

LST boat. His leg was still bandaged, something to be careful of, but that wasn't important. Not with a three-day pass burning a hole in his pocket.

It was 11 A.M. and a mighty long while since the early hospital breakfast. So after he'd got through gaping like a hick, Pommer turned into the cafeteria. He got everything out of the wall slots, crullers, sandwich, cereal, cup of coffee, squirt of cream. Then he luggered the tray to the front, where he could sit in the window and watch the crowds and the theater lights. It was like eating two meals at once, one with his eyes and one with his lips. Only he never finished. He was halfway through when he saw the little man outside.

A little man leaning low and close to a gold-headed cane. An expensive little man in a black striped suit, with glasses dangling from a black silk cord, and eyes bright, shining, and round as blue aggies. Two blue aggies staring at him. After a minute the little man's lips began to tremble. A pale, wet tongue slithered out to caress them. That was when he hopped through the revolving doors, clear up to Pommer's table.

"You're like him!" There was triumph in the voice, and awe. "You're enough like him to be her own son!" The blue eyes closed. One hand reached out, began to fumble over Pommer's face.

The sailor thought of socking him only he was too old, in spite of the pressure of the strong knuckles on his collar bone, holding him tight against the chair. The guy was maybe drunk, though the wandering fingers passing his nose didn't smell of whisky. It was disinfectant and iodine, all those nameless, frightening odors Pommer had left behind in the hospital corridors. So the guy was probably nuts and escaped from some sanatorium. Pommer relaxed, he might as well play along.

The old gent was hissing, breathing on his own fingers as they sped softly, delicately, like the brush of butterfly wings. "It's remarkable! You have the same bony nose, even a mole on your left cheek, not so large, but a mole. Your eyebrows are thick, your lips full, and your neck smooth as a girl's."

The blue eyes opened. "That's the most important part because Jerrett has no protruding Adam's apple."

"Jerrett who?" Pommer asked it gently, like he was talking to a two-year-old.

"Jerrett van Winston, of course. And I'm not mad, young man. I'm just very grateful to have found some one so like Jerrett."

"What difference does it make?"

"It means a lady can die happy."

"Why does she have to die?"

"Because fate and cancer will it."

The words were cold, sucking, tugging at the air like the first clod of soil lifted reluctantly from the earth to make room for a grave. Ensign Lee Pommer who had seen so much, too much of death, shivered.

The old gentleman clucked in dismay. "Now I've disturbed you! I didn't mean to, I want your help, and I've gone about it the wrong way I've been so excited."

He pulled a chair close, sat down, folding his hands on top of his gold-headed cane, and resting his chin on top of them. He had a brown, wrinkled face, and little white tufts of hair peeking from under his bowler hat, like a miniature halo over each ear. He sat hunched so, in silence, like a small, dark monkey sitting alone behind some distant bars. A blue eyed monkey with sad, wistful eyes.

"I'm Dr. Service. For forty years I've taken care of the Van Winston family. I've seen them born and I've seen them die. I've sent them off to wars, and I've helped them when they've come back. Only Jerrett hasn't come back."

"A lot of boys aren't back."

"Jerrett has been reported missing since the Normandy invasion. There's been no word at all."

"Lots of boys turn up after they've been reported missing."

"There's no time. Mrs. Van Winston may die today or tomorrow, and I want her to die happy. I want you to come and be her son."

The sailor gaped, then laughed. The old guy was nuts. "Listen, brother, you may fool part of the world part of the time, but you don't fool ladies about their sons. And if you're thinking of pulling that plastic surgery gag."

"Mrs. van Winston is blind."

SHE was. She was such a little thing lying there in bed. A wax doll, with wispy, streaked hair, staring, unseeing eyes, and a shiny face, white as death. With little red veins of life crisscrossing all the skin, as though she had been forgotten and left out in the sun or the rain, and the wax had become transparent and cracked. A doll with its sawdust leaking out.

She was surrounded by silks and satines and all the luxuries of one of New York's finest hotels. Even the sheets were silk, pale pink; he could see them where they stuck below the covers at the foot, dragging clear down to the floor. But there was no dust on the floor, only thick

maroon carpet, and the white shoes of a nurse and the black shoes of a doctor and the brown polished shoes of a gentleman secretary. All this. And she was blind and dying, and her son was missing in Normandy.

Lee Pommer was glad he had come.

He stepped over to the bed. "Hello, mother. I've come home."

She didn't smile, her lips trembled as though she were afraid to believe. "Is it you really? I'm blind now, just since you went away. It makes everything seem strange, even your voice. It's huskier."

"A war changes you. It changes you a lot."

"Sit by me, Jerrett, and let me look at you."

Again there were those butterfly wings brushing over his face. Only now he knew what they meant, what they were trying to see. These fingers were cold and smelt of lilies of the valley. They touched the thick eyebrows and the thin, bony nose; the mole that was not so large but large enough; the full lips and the so importantly smooth neck.

She smiled. The smile you read about in the Bible, or see maybe once in a fleeting dream.

"You've come home, Jerrett, and I'm so glad. You don't know how it is, when you're blind. You're afraid to trust anyone." She turned to the table, to a girl laughing behind glass and a silver frame. "It's gotten so I'm even afraid to trust Gay."

The girl had blonde, wavy hair and light eyes, clear, almost as though you could see through them. They were pretty, mocking, to match the twinkle of the brown eyes in the picture beside her. More glass and more silver and another smiling mouth above a Navy uniform. It wasn't nice to think of him maybe rotting somewhere in the nameless mud of France.

"Why don't you trust Gay?" Pommer could only mimic. Dr. Service had said not to cross her. Her mind was wandering, she was delirious a good deal of the time, seeing ghosts and imagining tales of buried treasure. "Why don't you trust her?"

"Because the treasure is yours, Jerrett. I won't trust anyone with the secret. They might try to take it from you while you're away."

Little chills ran up and down his spine. "What treasure, mother?"

"All your father's wealth. I hid it right after he died. You were only a boy then, so of course I couldn't tell you. There's

thirty million dollars in one thousand dollar bills."

SUDDENLY, the chills had stopped their chasing. Ensign Lee Pommer sat back, stiff and hard, like he'd been slapped. He still held the thin, cold hand, but he looked at the others in that room, at Dr. Service shaking his head and smiling tolerantly. At the nurse rearranging a bowl of gladioli. At the secretary clicking a pencil against his teeth. The sailor stooped and tucked the sheet up to give himself time to think, to wonder if he did smell a mouse.

But they were all so casual and you just couldn't be casual about thirty million. Not if it was real.

Dr. Service leaned over the fevered face. "Now, Martha, it's time you slept."

"Go to sleep nothing! Frank Service, get out of here and take everyone with you. I want to talk to my son."

"You're a hard patient, Martha, with no respect for a doctor." He laughed, but he went. He took the nurse and the secretary with him and left Lee Pommer alone with Mrs. Martha van Winston and her dream of thirty million dollars.

After the door had closed, Martha leaned close, whispered, "Look outside. See if anyone's listening."

He was almost as curious as she, and a little disappointed. "No one's listening. Why should they be?"

"Thirty millions is a lot of money, boy. It might tempt old friends or new friends. It might tempt anyone." She sighed, just the merest wisp of breath.

"Forget the money and let me tell you about the war. Don't you want to know how it is?"

"There isn't time, Jerrett. I've got to talk about the money. I've got to let you know where your father's money is." Her eyes were hot and bright. Her hands that had been cold were burning now.

"Aren't you too tired?"

"Of course I'm tired, but there isn't even time to rest. I'm dying. I know that, in spite of what Dr. Service says. There is so little time. All the money is at home, up beside the Hudson where our hearts are. I'd be there now only I made them bring me here, hoping that somehow in the maze of sailors walking the street, Dr. Service would find you. As he did.

"He said all along that you were alive, you had to be alive, that you probably had amnesia." She laughed, warm, musically. "Tell me, Jerrett, did you recognize him first or did he recognize you?"

"He recognized me." Lee Pommer felt like a heel; he had no business here being

someone else's son. He wanted to tell her, yet he couldn't. She was too happy.

"You met him and it all came back, your past and your name, it came back in time." She nodded, content. "I've read about it in stories. It's rather fitting, the Van Winstons always have been story-book people. We've never done things the common way.

"That's why I chose the golf course to hide the money in. Whoever would think of finding thirty million dollars on a golf course? It's justice that the last of us should find the means to a full life in the very place that has meant death to so many of us. Get the money, Jerrett, but watch out for death. Watch out for the lightning that has fed too often on our flesh."

It was then Lee Pommer knew who Martha van Winston was. He remembered seeing the two-page spread about her family in one of the Sunday supplements. There had been pictures of the grey stone mansion, with its golf course and its curse of lightning. Four male generations of Van Winstons had died in the grounds, all struck dead by lightning. The first, running behind a wooden plow; the second, counting the winter pelts that had brought him millions. The third and fourth while playing golf together.

It was after that Martha's father built the golf houses, eighteen tight little houses of brick with turreted tile roofs and a lightning rod to each. Eighteen little castles, one to every tee, as a shelter from the death that had cursed his family.

Lee Pommer wasn't soothing a babbling woman any more, he wanted to know.

"Tell me, where is the treasure?"

She chuckled. "So now you want your gold? Well, boy, you'll have to work for it. The Van Winstons have always worked for their money, that's why I'm not handing you a bank book. I'll tell you part of the secret.

"At first I hid it in the fruit cellar, beneath the floor in the little room with its secret door behind the tomato preserves. Later I figured that was too easy; everyone looks in basements for hidden doors. So I thought of the golf houses. You'll find the key in the first and the treasure in the fifteenth."

There was a knock on the door, hesitant, apologetic. The secretary stepped inside.

"Pardon me. Your daughter has arrived, Mrs. van Winston. Miss Gay is talking to Dr. Service now. He says you must rest between visitors. Perhaps eat

a little. Nurse Fitzgerald has gone to fetch some hot milk." Even before the words were done the nurse was pushing past.

Pommer hesitated. He wanted to stay, he had the feeling he must stay, yet he couldn't. Not with Mrs. van Winston asking him to go, with her resting so quietly, her face at peace, and her words:

"You know now, Jerrett. You know enough to guess the rest, don't ever forget what I told you. Bless you, boy."

He kissed her then. He kissed her for Jerrett van Winston, missing in Normandy.

THE living room was empty, except for the perfume of flowers and the expensive, impersonal furniture of a hotel. For perhaps four minutes Lee Pommer stood alone, staring into nothing, wondering what to believe, wondering whom to believe.

The doctor came first. He stepped in from the long hall that connected all the rooms. He seemed younger without his hat and cane, with the white fringes about his ears part of a full head of hair, white and thick as a polar bear's scruff.

He held out his hand. "It's a rare privilege you've had, to give true, lasting happiness."

"I'm not sure I like this, Dr. Service. I wonder if it's fair letting her live a lie."

"She's happy. Isn't that enough?"

"What about the treasure, the thirty million in one thousand dollar bills?"

The doctor laughed then, he laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks and his fat little tummy bobbed into jelly. "Oh, my boy, did you believe her?"

"It could be. The Van Winstons are rich enough to have thirty millions."

"Do you think her lawyers would allow her to hide it here and there like an old bone? Last time she told the story to me, she said she'd hid it in the alcove behind the attic chimney." He stopped, smiling and bland. He asked no questions but the very silence shrieked at Pommer, "Come now, boy, where'd she say she'd hid it this time?"

The sailor grinned. "She said she'd hid it in the fruit cellar, in the secret room behind the tomato preserves."

"Ah!" It was so soft as almost not to have been uttered at all. Yet it had come, and along with it a fleeting smirk of self-satisfaction. Of triumph even, to leave the blue eyes cold as ice.

Evil was here, and greed. Thirty million dollars worth of greed.

Dr. Service bowed. "If you'll excuse me, I'll look in on Gay. She cried so hard when

I reported her mother no better, that she had to rest."

But he didn't go. The nurse had opened the door.

"Dr. Service, Mrs. van Winston is dead."

"Why didn't you call me?" It was angry, a curse.

The nurse twisted at her apron. She was crying and just about scared pink. "I wasn't there, I'd stepped into the bathroom. When I came back, she was dead."

They stood by her side, all of them except Gay who was still resting and didn't know. There was pity in their faces and a shrugging acceptance. The king is dead, long live the king. That was in their backs when they turned away. She was dead, they could leave her now. They could even forget her.

Only Lee Pommer wouldn't. He wouldn't forget the way she had said, "Bless you, boy." Nor that she had met death with a powdered nose.

TIMES SQUARE seemed better than ever. Here was laughter, a carefree world with everyone in it alive. Pommer leaned against a polished window, watched a machine inside making doughnuts. The doughnuts formed a pretty picture, a flotilla of little brown boats sailing down a sea of boiling oil. Only Pommer wasn't really noticing, he was remembering how Mrs. van Winston's face had been powdered, exquisitely.

He might never have noticed if he just naturally didn't have an eye for trouble, and more than that, a photographic brain. Hours, days later, he could bring things back, reconstruct them exactly as they were.

So afterwards he remembered the hand, its position and the force, and that it hadn't been an accident.

He had left the doughnut window and stepped to the curb just as the lights changed. A blur of traffic surged forward, and the hand, this strange, unknown, terrible hand, had come out of the crowd, balled between Pommer's shoulder blades and sent him crashing in front of the onrushing cars.

He didn't have a chance. There was nothing to catch hold of, the crowd behind him, the thin air before. He couldn't turn, not with his game leg crumpling under him.

The taxi hit him square in the side, the right wheel in his ribs and his head twisted round, staring up at all the monstrous, dirty machinery. There were screams on the sidewalk, and a policeman's whistle. By and by, the wail of an ambulance.

Lee Pommer listened with interest. His eyes were closed and he was quite comfortable with someone's coat stuck under his head for a pillow. He peeked at the folks battling with the cops for a look, wondering was he dead, maybe hoping he was, and if he wasn't maybe they could see him die. A happy New York crowd ready for anything.

He wasn't dead, he wasn't even hurt due to the marvelous brakes on the cab, just nudged and bruised a little, but there was no sense letting anyone know. The ambulance was here already, so he might as well get a free ride, a ride away from someone in that crowd who had balled that tight knuckled fist. Someone who wanted him dead quick.

Of course there was no fooling at the hospital. He was put through the mill and came out standing on his own two feet, with a cup of black coffee in one hand and a sour voice in his ear:

"You're lucky, sailor, to be alive. After this, watch where you're going. Don't step in front of green lights."

Don't step in front of green lights. Hal

The afternoon papers were in the streets, with a whole page devoted to Mrs. van Winston, her money, her mansion, the curse of lightning, her adopted daughter, Gay, and her son, missing in Normandy. The pictures were all swell, except the one of Jerrett, a little snapshot taken in a rainstorm overseas. They could have printed John Doe's picture for all it looked like Jerrett.

Pommer studied it over for quite a bit. Then he read the last line again: Martha van Winston will lie in state at Hope Hall, her ancestral home on the Hudson, until her burial in the family cemetery.

Pommer grinned. He'd always thought lying in state was a gruesome business, but he was planning on making a party out of this. Not an expensive one, two cents for the paper, a dollar forty-five for a round trip ticket, thirty cents for a jar of cold cream, ten cents for absorbent cotton, ditto talcum powder, that was all on his expense account. But he went with his eyes open. He knew there could be one more item. It could cost him his life.

HOPE HALL was more than its name. It was a dream come true. Built eighty years before, it was reminiscent of castles in England and feudal days. There were catamounts and turrets and window sills three feet thick. There was a front door large enough to admit a railroad train, with a deep filled moat outside. Swans slept in the moat, and a harvest moon came to touch the great stone wall with golden fingers.

Far off to the east was a bobbing flashlight, not a bold light walking through the night, but one that blinked and hid in bushes. Lee Pommer felt of the knife in his pocket and followed.

The lawn was dew soft, the night cool and clear, made for elves and fairies. Sugar maples lined the cliff edge against the river, tall, fat trees dressed in holiday colors of red and gold. Beds of flaming chrysanthemums dotted the green as far as eye could see, to the very edge of the golf course. That was where the light led.

It came to the first tee and disappeared inside the golf house, for a moment it shone against the mesh-protected windows, then the shades were drawn. Black shades beneath a black roof, a roof with a witch's peak tipped by a silver ball. Only Pommer wasn't looking at the roof, he watched the second figure, the one that had been between him and the flashlight. A bare-headed girl in a scarlet cloak.

For perhaps two minutes she stayed outside the tiny house, kneeling, peering through the crack at the window's edge. When she whirled and disappeared inside, Lee Pommer ran, as fast, as silently as he could.

It was the girl in the silver frame, the adopted daughter Gay. She wasn't laughing now.

"Have you found it, Mr. Huntley?"

The secretary whirled from the cabinet behind the door. He had been prying with his fingers at each crack of the dark oak panels, pushing, pulling at every knot-hole. His back was to the fireplace and so was hers, to the rough stone mantel and the polished cement apron, dotted by a hundred silvered keys. Keys of all shapes and sizes set flush in the cement. But there was no time to look at them now, not with Henry Huntley jumping like a cornered beast.

There was a flash of fear in his eyes, then anger. After that, nothing. "Found what, Gay?"

"Mother's money." She sat down on the narrow bench running all the way around the bare room. Her eyes were insolent as she slipped a cigarette from the silver case in her hand. "Aren't you ashamed?"

"Where and what does shame get you?"

She laughed. "I'll wager it won't get you thirty million dollars." He held a match for her, and she blew smoke into his kindling eyes. "Mother's not buried yet, and no one is even pretending to shed tears. Dr. Service is tearing up the basement, Nurse Fitzgerald is ransacking the library, and you're searching here. It isn't decent."

"Why should you worry over what's decent, she didn't leave anything to you! She took you out of an orphanage, brought you up to think you were a millionaire, then dropped you flat. Is that fair?"

"Perhaps not. Only she didn't drop me flat. On my twenty-first birthday she set up a trust fund for me of five hundred thousand dollars." Her smile was the smile of the pictures, mocking. "I ought to be able to struggle along on that, don't you think?"

"Perhaps. But you want the rest, you want what all of us are searching for."

"What none of us have a right to. It's Jerrett's money now. If you had any honor you wouldn't try to rob a man who can't fight back."

Henry Huntley measured the girl before him, quite frankly, quite openly. He was a handsome hunk of young manhood, tall and smooth and excellently tailored. "I want to bargain with you, Gay. I'll tell you something if you'll tell me something."

"What?"

"Are you in love with Jerrett?"

"My own brother?"

"Your brother by adoption."

"If you read the papers you'll know that before he left we were supposed to have been engaged. Does that answer your question?"

"No, but your eyes do. You have the coldest pair of eyes I've ever seen, except maybe Dr. Service."

Gay dropped her cigarette, stepped on it. "What were you going to tell me?"

"Jerrett came home today."

She sat perfectly still, expressionless. "Who said so?"

"I saw him."

"You don't know him. Mother hired you after Jerrett had gone to sea."

"Your mother said it was Jerrett, and so did Dr. Service."

"Jerrett saw mother?"

"He saw your mother and he didn't see you." Huntley leaned close, watching the disbelief in her face, the anger. "He doesn't love you, Gay. You don't have to worry about hitting a man who can't hit back."

"How do you know what I have to worry about?"

"I know he hasn't worried about you. He knew you were in the other bedroom; he knew you were facing trouble and death. He left before Dr. Service called you. His mother told him where the treasure was, and he's kept it nicely to himself."

Her hands were locked on the bench,

white, little clutching claws. "How can you know?"

"Because I heard her. It was just as I knocked on the door, I heard her quite plainly. Shall I tell you, Gay?"

She shook her head. "It's Jerrett's money."

"It's anyone's money, whoever gets there first." He laughed, watching the struggle in her face, then he took her in his arms. "Thirty million dollars, Gay, we could be very happy you and I." His lips touched hers, held them long, hungrily. "What do you say, Gay?"

She looked at him, at his strength, at his masculine conceit. He came to her again and she let him kiss her. When he had done, there was a whisper on his lips. "Tell me, Henry. Tell me where the treasure is."

Lee Pommer backed away. He backed through the moonlight, across the lawn and the moat bridge, and through the door beyond. It was open. It was inevitable that it would be open. Hope Hall was not sleeping well this night. It was a house of greed and unhappiness. And death.

MARTHA VAN WINSTON lay in a vaulted chamber on the second floor. She slept in a canopied bed and might only have been resting, but for the candles at head and foot, and the tier upon tier of massed flowers. Stifling flowers. Slowly, the sailor approached her side. He could see her smile again in memory.

Then he took out the jar of cold cream and the cotton and began dabbing at her nose. It seemed a terrible thing to do somehow, there in that lonely room with all the silent, watching flower faces. But it wasn't so terrible as what he found.

Murder.

What he had thought he'd find, what the powder tried to mask. Two purpled spots where her nose had been pinched and held until she was dead.

Cancer hadn't been enough, she had to die by murder, too. All because her son had come home and she had told her secret. The price was too high. Even for thirty million in one thousand dollar bills.

The flowers at the head of the bed stirred, air had come from somewhere, an opening door or a window. Slowly Pommer turned, his hands held plain and empty so that his intentions might not be misunderstood. Because someone in this house had tried to kill him not so many hours ago.

Someone unidentifiable in the babbling crowd outside the high ambulance window. It would have been any of them in the hotel that afternoon. Any of them

could have killed Mrs. van Winston. Even the doctor or Gay, using the hall between the two bedrooms, passing outside the living room where he had stood alone. It could have been the secretary or the nurse who maybe hadn't gone to the bathroom after all. Whoever it was had wanted the Van Winston secret to die with Lee Pommer.

Pommer smiled into the startled eyes. "Miss Gay van Winston, I believe?"

She came out of the shadows to stand in the magic circle of candlelight. She was very beautiful, tall, slim, and wonderfully sure of herself.

"You do look like Jerrett. Quite a bit like him." She tilted her head higher. "I'm guessing right, aren't I? You are the one?" He bowed. "Did it amuse you to fool a blind lady?"

"No, I thought I was helping. I didn't know what it would mean."

The girl looked to the bed, and then away. "Did mother tell you about the treasure?"

"She did."

"Have you told anyone?"

"Dr. Service explained it was a fool's dream. She was delirious."

Gay smiled, slowly, so satisfied. "Did you tell him what she said in this delirium?"

"I told him that she had hidden it in the basement, behind the tomato preserves."

The girl laughed. It began as a chuckle and rose to the very roof in sheer joy. "Did mother really tell you it was behind the tomato preserves?"

"It was there once, it's somewhere else now."

She stilled abruptly, like the turning of a storm. "What are you going to do about this, about what you know?"

"Nothing. She didn't tell it to me, Lee Pommer. She told it to her son. I shall wait till he returns from France."

"So much money doesn't tempt you?"

"To earn it, yes. To steal it, no."

She lifted one of the great candles, white as a camellia and thick as a winter apple. She brought it close to his face, so close he could feel the heat. She held it there, by his eyes, looking. Looking. And her own eyes were wild and clear, like something untamed from the forest.

Silently she returned the candle to its twisted iron holder that was as tall and graceful as she. Then she took a ring from her pocket.

"You made my mother's last hour happy. You became a very real part of her life. Perhaps you would like to see what she will wear into her grave."

THE ring was massive, a solid piece of black onyx fashioned into a wide head. Across it, sharp and jagged, stretched a deep silver bolt of lightning. It was absurdly simple and very effective. It brought forth pictures of a man running madly from his fate, behind a wooden plow. Of another who held his wealth in his hand, and died.

The girl was smiling. "I see you know of the Van Winston curse. It is our shield, one of the few small parts of our lives that has not become public property. Each of us has one of these rings, a new one for each of the living. An old one buried in every grave in Hope Hill cemetery, ever since the lightning killed its first Van Winston. Our rings are never far from us, not so long as we live, not so long as we are dead."

The girl left him then, she stepped to the quiet, sleeping figure, slipped the ring gently on a thin, white finger.

Lee Pommer waited for her outside the door. "You haven't asked why I am here. I wasn't invited, I just came."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to see her again."

"You couldn't forget her. I'm glad. I don't want mother forgotten too quickly."

"The papers said she'll be buried here."

"Yes, she'll never leave Hope Hill again."

"Who is the undertaker?"

"Dr. Service, of course. We're in the country here, Mr. Pommer. We do things in country ways, where one man brings us into the world and the same man sees us out of it, right down into our own little private hell."

And it was hell that he was finding. Rot and filth, mad children of greed.

He found it in Dr. Service's room, in his checkbook. There were six checks in it made out since July 7 to Mary Fitzgerald. The first for one hundred dollars, the last for one thousand.

Nurse Fitzgerald's room was tiny and Victorian. It was really two rooms, an alcove with a bed and a dresser, a tiny sitting room with a desk and sofa. Pommer didn't attempt to search it. He leaned against the door and wondered if he were blackmailing Dr. Service, where would he keep his proof? The bed was out of the question, the desk entirely too obvious. He lifted the pictures off the wall, looked under the rug, then squatted in front of the sofa.

It was a long one with a great deal of wood carving, curls of mahogany that twisted at the end of each shoulder rest like the thick coils of a snake. Pommer remembered hearing once that in olden times, padded shoulder rests were some-

times hollow, miniature safes. Gently, he tugged, and the whole mahogany curl gave way, dragging a long, slim drawer behind.

There were papers in the drawer. Letters. The first one dated June 31st:

Madame:

We have registered here at the hospital a young man, victim of amnesia and shock. He has just been returned from the Normandy beachhead, where he was picked up after many hours in the water. His identification tags were gone, but there was a letter in his pocket signed, Jerrett van Winston. We do not know whether this boy is the "Dan" the letter is addressed to or whether he had written it and not mailed it. There was no envelope.

Perhaps you may be able to identify him. We do not know his rank, most of his clothes were gone when he was found. He is about twenty-six, has brown hair and eyes, a slight mole on the left cheek, weighs 185, height six feet. He wears an interesting ring of black onyx with a silver bar zig-zagging across the face. I have enclosed a picture of the boy to clarify my description.

We will appreciate any assistance you may be able to give us.

The second letter was from the same hospital and dated July 7:

Dear Dr. Service:

Thank you for your prompt reply in Mrs. van Winston's behalf. We regret that neither you nor she were able to identify our patient.

IT WAS four-thirty A.M. when Lee Pommer reached the hospital on Long Island. Fate, in one of her kinder, whimsical moods had let this be the same barracks he had been shipped home to, so he didn't have much trouble getting by the gates. Just a few cracks about having his head examined for returning in the middle of the first night of a three-day pass. Once past the jeers Pommer headed for the commander. He didn't stop anywhere else, but at the top.

The old guy was asleep and ready to fight it out, when he saw the broken window and the sailor sitting on his bed. Pommer talked fast. Plenty fast. He laid the letters down, and the ring he'd taken from Mrs. van Winston's finger, and the photographs he'd gathered from her dresser, hers, and Gay's and Jerrett's, and one of the old house. He told about the thirty million, and the bruises hiding beneath a camouflage of powder.

At first the officer had felt Pommer's

forehead and taken his pulse. Later, he dressed without speaking, just his eyes watching and his ears listening. They raced through the cold night to one of the smaller barracks across the quadrangle. Men slept in rows, a lot of still, white mounds, the bitter fruit of battle. The chief held a light to one, compared the photograph with the sleeping boy. Then he wakened him, gently.

He sat down beside him, soothing his hands over the forehead, frowning and troubled, even in sleep. He didn't touch the bandages zigzagging through patches of brown hair.

The boy awoke, and his eyes were lost. They were seeing, but they didn't have life, not the sparkle in the picture. The doctor took the photos, large cabinet photos in gleaming silver frames, stood them in a row across the bed. Jerrett and Martha and Gay. And Hope Hall taken one some summer morning long ago.

The boy looked at them, dully at first, then he began to laugh, laughter that melted into tears. He shrieked until the whole ward was awake. Before they could stop him, he had broken the glass, the first with his bare fist, the second with his bleeding fist. He ripped out the pictures, Martha's and Gay's, and held the shreds of them to his face as he cried himself back to sanity.

Lee Pommer wondered if he'd done a kindness. He wasn't seeing Jerrett van Winston, but Gay in Henry Huntley's arms, with her lips brushing his, whispering, "Tell me, Henry. Tell me where the treasure is."

Pommer lit out. He didn't wait for anyone. It was midmorning when the station taxi set him outside Hope Hall. Cars filled the driveway, organ music swelled through the great door, held like a living cloud above that sun-drenched lawn. The servants let him in, enough to say he had known Jerrett in France. Quite enough.

PEOPLE thronged the halls, they sat in rented chairs and whispered. Still the organ played, waiting for the service to begin. So far as Pommer could see, Martha, lying in a bronze coffin, was the only Van Winston attending her funeral. He raced down the stairs, over the moat and through the maze of flowers to the golf house.

The first golf house was a shambles, the panelled wall hacked into splinters, the floor gaping holes. Lee knelt, ran his fingers over the keys in the cement fireplace apron. They were tight, all tight but one, that moved slightly at his touch. His combat knife flicked it out.

On he ran, past the third, the fourth tees, each house hacked and marred and all but destroyed inside. When he got to the fourteenth tee he could hear it, the blow of the ax and the crying of the wood. And outside of the fifteenth tee house, he could hear the breathing. A man's breathing, loud and terrible. Beyond control.

Standing in the doorway was Gay van Winston.

She didn't see Pommer, so intent was she on the man inside with his back to her and the ax in both his hands crashing, crashing over and over against the soft, old wood. Pommer started to shoulder past. She held him, dragged him out, clear to the flag standing in its cup.

"Don't go in there. He hasn't found the money and you can't reason with him."

"Who said I wanted to reason with him? I want to knock his silly block off. And yours, too." There was such contempt in his voice, so much bitterness that she stepped back as though she had been slapped. Pommer turned to Henry Huntley.

The secretary stood on the threshold. Gone were his neat clothes, his suave, polished air. He scowled above the ax dangling in his hand. "So you've come. You've finally come for your gold."

"Why not?"

"And Gay has been soft-soaping you." He stepped close. "Gay doesn't love you, she's in this with me. She's helping me get your money so we can go away together."

"How far do you think you'll go?"

"As far as we want." One minute the ax was in his hand, the next it was on the ground and his fingers were laced tight about Pommer's throat. "Tell me, Jerrett, where she said it was. I thought I heard it all. I heard her say it was in the first golf house, but it wasn't."

The fingers tightened until they were like clutching, steel claws. "Tell me before I choke the life from you!"

Pommer kneed into Huntley's stomach. The secretary doubled and the sailor ran for the golf house. Before he got to the door he heard Gay's scream, he ducked. The ax whistled through the place where his head had been.

The gleaming blade hit the top of the mantel and a round stone rolled out. There was metal behind the stone, green, dull metal. Henry Huntley ran to it. He pounded on it and he slobbered.

Perhaps that was why none of them heard Dr. Service coming. Dr. Service and the nurse, Mary Fitzgerald.

Dr. Service carried a gun, held them

silent beneath his smile and that bit of blued steel. "So we've found the treasure at last!"

"We, nothing!" Huntley sneered. "I found it."

"But you haven't gotten it." Pommer was mildness itself. "I'll bet anything tha green metal is steel. It won't cut with an ax."

Huntley grabbed the ax, slashed. He worked till the sparks flew, more stones fell, enough to show a door with a blind keyhole in the center. Pommer smiled. Standing there against the wall, beneath the menace of Dr. Service's gun, he smiled and wished the lightning curse of the Van Winston would come and serve them now.

He looked about the room with its studding stripped naked. Then he looked at his hands, two hands and one small knife against a gun, an ax, and a room full of people. But then of course there was the lightning.

"Really, Mr. Huntley, there's a much better way of getting through that metal. Here's the key."

Pommer reached in his pocket. Gay lunged at him. "You fool! Don't give it to them, save it for Jerrett!"

And there, in her voice and in her eyes, was the truth. It showed how false those kisses had been, it showed why she had believed him when he said he didn't want to steal the money. She could believe that, because she was honest, too. She'd been playing along for Jerrett. Gay grabbed the key out of Pommer's hand, raced for the door even as the sailor dove for Dr. Service.

IT WAS not a clean job, too many people were in the way, but he managed to move the gun arm a little, so the bullet got her in the shoulder instead of the heart. Dr. Service rapped the barrel on Pommer's collar bone, held them again beneath its menace, nodded to Gay whimpering on the floor.

"Get the key from her, Mary, get the key, and bring it here."

So the moment came again, the same moment Pommer had brought about before when Gay had so unfortunately interrupted. The moment when all eyes would be on the key. No one saw the sailor reaching for the lightning, not true lightning but its son, electricity.

Huntley's ax had laid bare the wires, not cut through them, but left them dangling loose against the stringer. One yank and the old cable was broken in two, with its hot end snaking across the floor to Dr. Service's ankles. Pommer wasn't sure whether it would mean death or not.

He didn't particularly care. All he wanted was for the gun to be dropped for just one minute.

It was. The wire didn't kill Dr. Service. He would live until they strapped him in the electric chair, till lightning struck him indeed in full force.

Dr. Service would live to hear about Gay and Jerrett's marriage, how they gave a great deal of money to the Navy relief and a lot to Lee Pommer. That was in Jerrett van Winston's eyes when the Navy ambulance deposited him at the door in that moment, when Dr. Service began screaming with the pain of the burns on his legs. Screaming and cursing while Lee Pommer held the little wild cat that was Mary Fitzgerald.

"Let me go!" She bit him on the hand.

"You'll go, my pet, straight to jail. There'll be a lot of charges against you—blackmail and murder."

Her eyes popped. "I didn't kill her! I didn't know he was going to kill her. I only kept my mouth shut after she was dead. He said he had to kill her before Gay exposed him and let Mrs. van Winston know she'd told her secret to the wrong man." The girl was shrieking in hysteria.

"Dr. Service promised we'd never be caught, that I'd be rich for life." She was sullen now, sullen and hating. "The old woman was going to die anyway."

Jerrett almost struck her when she said that. He turned from her and held Gay's hands very tightly. After the Navy doctor had taken the bullet from her shoulder, he opened the green steel door. It was quite a big box with one very small envelope inside:

Jerrett:

Do you think me quite a fool? You'll find the money in a trust fund which my lawyers aren't to give you until you present them with the key to this box and this note.

And don't believe this just a trick. I have wished to leave you a legacy, something worth more than money. I wanted to leave you stripped of your false friends and knowing the true. Thirty million in one thousand dollar bills was quite a nice piece of bait.

God bless you, boy, and keep you.

Your Mother.

Jerrett smiled. He folded the note and he was still smiling, tenderly, wistfully. He knelt by Pommer. "It was a lucky break your finding the letters from the hospital. I might never have known who I was."

"I didn't need the letters to guess you
(Continued on page 46)

Good Night, Dream Bandit

By Emil Petaja

¶ *That fake holdup may have seemed a clever radio gag, but the slugs in that heckler's gun were no joke!* **¶**

DETECTIVE SERGEANT TOM GRANT walked down Hollywood Boulevard seething. The Old Man had blasted the whole department with his acid tongue, and had picked Grant as keyman. Grant had a reputation for cleaning up cases plenty fast. Now a whole week had gone by since he started on this detail.

It was those cockeyed "Dream Bandit" robberies. The newspapers were making a Roman holiday out of it, poking fun at the police department. The commissioner didn't like it, not even a little bit.

This was how it started. Just one week ago an exclusive boulevard shop was touched for several G's by a plenty smooth character. The girl cashier described the "Dream Bandit" as tall, curly-haired, and very handsome. He was togged in a tux, and was nice and polite about the way he flashed his rod and asked her to please fork over.

She did.

Three nights later it happened again. Around nine o'clock. Just before the Hollywood shops closed.

It was the slickness of the Dream Bandit's technique that got the commissioner's goat. And Grant's, too. His lean jaw bit down hard as he retasted the bitter words the Old Man had flung in his direction.

It was Saturday night. If Grant didn't miss his guess the Dream Bandit was due to pull another stickup before it was over.

He scowled down at his watch. Five minutes to eight. The Dream Bandit showed up just before nine. But—where to look for him? He couldn't cover the whole boulevard!

"D'ya really think the Dream Bandit will be there, Maze?" a feminine voice near him trilled.

"The sign says so, don't it?"

Grant blinked after the two girls, then looked up.

The big neon sign said, "Major Broadcasting Studios." And the blue-fringed banner underneath said:

Tonight at Eight

Krispy-Krunch Presents Radio's Funniest Stunt Program

We Want You to Name It or Bust Tonight We Give You THE DREAM BANDIT!



TOM GRANT stared, then gave a low whistle. Like everyone else, he knew the *Name It or Bust* program. It was one of those wacky radio shows where people picked from the audience had to answer a certain question or else go through some sort of a gag. It was strictly for fun. Usually the butt of the gag won himself a handful of bucks.

Grant squinted at the sign, then at the studio door. He had a hunch.

He stepped lithely up the curved stairway, and since he had no ticket, flashed his badge at the usher. The boy nodded and stepped aside, wide-eyed.

He found a seat near the door. Pretty soon the red sign flashed to *On The Air*, and the gagster M.C. started spieling.

"I know how anxious you all are to meet the famous Dream Bandit," he said. "That's all the papers have been full of for the past week! So—let me present—The Dream Bandit!"

A curtain behind him slid aside. The crowd started roaring. Grant had to smile.

The guy back of the curtain was a sawed-off, potbellied runt with half-moon hair and a yokelish grin. It would have been hard to find anybody who looked

less like the real Dream Bandit, as the newspapers had described him.

"What's your name, Dream Bandit?" the M.C. asked.

"Mortimer."

"Would you like to earn yourself fifty bucks, Mort?"

"Would I!"

The crowd laughed.

"Well, then, here's the idea. You are to hold up the cashier at one of the Hollywood shops, just like the real Dream Bandit did. If you can convince her that you're really him, you get the fifty!"

Mortimer looked sad.

"Cheer up, Mort!" the M.C. laughed. "We're going to help you. Boys, bring out that curly toupee and a gun for our bandit!"

Grant watched them set a badly fit wig of wavy hair on Mortimer, and shoved a very fake gun in his hand. The M.C. gave some last minute directions, then Mortimer was herded out.

"Now!" the M.C. told the audience, with a wicked chuckle. "Here's the gag! He doesn't know it, but there's going to be another Dream Bandit come in that shop while he's busy trying to convince the girl. And this Dream Bandit will really be tall and good-looking, so—"

Grant didn't wait. He was moving noiselessly out, bent on following through his hunch.

MORTIMER'S trail led him off the boulevard and through a tangle of palm-lined streets, to a quiet row of brick buildings which were all dark except one. The last one in the row was lighted up with a fancy neon sign reading *Laura Tilson Cosmetics Are Made Here*.

Strictly big money.

Grant had slipped a five to the psychologist who was supposed to follow Mortimer and make sure he got back to the program before nine o'clock, flashed his badge, and promised to deliver Mortimer back to a certain bar across from the studio.

Grant had done a little reading on the subject of psychology himself. His hunch told him that the real Dream Bandit wouldn't miss a chance like this to make a grandstand play. Like most criminals, the Dream Bandit liked publicity. He had not only put on the dog with fancy clothes when he pulled his jobs, but he had gone out of his way to court publicity—putting on a glamor-boy act.

On the other hand, Grant was thinking, that might be just a cover-up for his real personality.

From behind a palm tree he watched

Mortimer's dumpy shadow bounce along after him as he passed through a street light's arc, and up to the front door of the cosmetics factory. The detective eased after him, phantomlike.

As he drew near the door he stepped over the crisp hedge and up to the window sill. He crouched, so as to get a once-over of the lighted hallway under the drawn window shade.

He saw a small foyer with a telephone switchboard, and a long dark hall leading back. Right across from where he crouched was a small brightly lit retail cosmetics shop.

A cute blonde was sitting behind a cashier's desk counting out stacks of green-notes, preparatory to putting them to bed in the open safe behind her.

Her eyes widened, startled, when she saw Mortimer walk up to the glass door of the swanky shop.

Grant froze when he heard a soft footstep behind him. His fingers tightened on the window sill. He whirled, but not quick enough.

He caught just a glimpse of a white tuxedo front and a trim white tie. Then something hard smashed down on his cranium, and everything went black.

Inside, Mortimer was insisting, sheepishly, "I am too the Dream Bandit!"

The blonde only laughed. "You! I must need glasses!"

"Better fork over that dough!" Mortimer quavered.

"Better scram, bub, before I call a cop!" the girl told him, grabbing the telephone receiver off her desk and starting to dial. She was no pantywaist.

Mortimer tugged out his fake gun and waved it at her. She grabbed it out of his hand and pulled the trigger. A misty spray of perfume filled the air.

She laughed liltingly. "That's nice. Ummm." She stopped dialing, and hung up.

"Now tell me, plump and pointless, what kind of a rib is this, anyway?"

THE front door swung open abruptly. A tall, good-looking man in faultless evening clothes stepped in. He walked up to the shop, pushed the door open with white-gloved hands. Inside, he removed his top hat, and gave the blonde a little bow and smile.

Her hands fluttered a little when she said, "Can I help you?"

He flashed her a big smile. "I'll wait until you're through with this—gentleman." He looked Mortimer up and down contemptuously.

Mortimer started in on the girl again,

sulkily. "Don't you believe I'm the Dream Bandit? Can't I convince you?"

The blonde laughed.

"Afraid not. Why, you don't look a bit like him. He's tall, good-looking, and has curly brown—" She bit her lip, then did a double-take in the direction of the tall newcomer. Her eyes bulged.

He gave a little bow.

"You're right, beautiful. This jerk can't be the Dream Bandit, for the simple reason that *I'm* him! Now, I'll appreciate it if you'll just hand over those piles of bills please . . ."

The man in evening clothes spoke with a pleasant drawl, but there was a sinister undertone to his politeness. His gloved right hand stayed in his topcoat pocket.

The blonde gasped, leaning against the table.

"You!" Mortimer gaped, fish-eyed. Then he began to chuckle and wag his forefinger.

The tall man frowned. "Better take a powder, butterball," he advised icily.

Mortimer walked right up to him, still shaking his finger. "You're not fooling me, big guy! I'm on to you!"

He turned to the girl, who seemed petrified with fear. "Don't let him scare you, girlie. He ain't no Dream Bandit. He's some ham actor from Major Broadcasting Studios.

"It's a gag! You see, I'm from the *Name It or Bust* program. This is all a stunt. You know how they always send somebody out to do some screwy thing, like sending me out to pretend I'm the Dream Bandit. Then they always send another guy out to butt in and heckle him! You're no more Dream Bandit than I am. Ha-ha!"

The blonde loosed a sigh of relief. "You sure had me going, mister. I get it, now. It's all a gag!"

The tall guy's eyes went brittle as he whipped a blunt-nosed revolver out of his pocket.

"I'm getting a little fed up with this chin-music," he snarled. "Hand over the dough!"

MORTIMER was from Missouri. He wasn't convinced yet. He made a playful grab for the gun. "What kind of perfume you got in yours, Mac? I got Dangerous Night!"

The Dream Bandit edged back, growling. "My trigger-finger is getting itchy," he snapped. "Keep your distance, fat boy." He whirled on the blonde.

"And you—wrap a rubber band around that lettuce and toss it over, if you know what's good for you!"

The blonde smiled sweetly. "Sorry."

"Sister," he hissed. "I ain't kidding!"

"Oh, no? I suppose next you'll try to tell me you aren't an actor, paid to make like a movie badman! I can tell you guys a mile off!"

The Bandit's finger eased over the trigger menacingly. But he hesitated. He knew there must be a night watchman somewhere in the factory. A shot might bring him running. Besides, he'd been doing okay so far, without having to bump anybody. The newspapers made him a glamorous character. Murder wouldn't set so good. It got people riled.

Impatiently he strode to the desk and started scooping up the frogskins himself.

The blonde slapped his fingers. "Naughty, naughty! Of course you're an actor! I can tell by your makeup!"

He froze. "What d'you mean?"

"I mean what you've got on your left cheek. You put it there to hide a scar shaped like a half-moon. I'm a cosmetitian. I ought to know. You used No. 7 gold-tan, but you should have used No. 8. It would blend better with—"

The Bandit seized her arm roughly. "Sister, you know what it ain't healthy to know!"

Mortimer stuck in his two cents. "What's more, Mister Fake, you're wearing a toupee! That curly brown hair of yours came out of a barbershop. I'll show you. See!"

With a quick move he snatched the wig off, disclosing that the Dream Bandit's hair was straight, black, combed slick against his head.

The Bandit's handsome face twisted into an ugly, brutal snarl of rage. He forgot his smooth acting. He seized a handful of bills and crammed them in his coat, then grabbed up his hat. His rod was pointed at the two of them.

"So you're pretty smart, both of you!" he sneered. "Well, you won't do much squealing to the cops about what the Dream Bandit really looks like, when you're stretched out cold on a morgue slab!"

His gun flamed with death.

The pretty blonde shrieked. Mortimer fell flat on his puss, moaning.

Behind the killer, glass shattered. A bullet splashed through it, winging the Bandit. He whirled, cursing.

The outer door was open. Framed in it stood Detective Sergeant Tom Grant. His face was grim. The gun in his hand was smoking.

His head ached. It was as if somebody was poking into it with hot needles. All he could see was a wavering blur in front of him. Then, as the blur cleared a little

he saw the Dream Bandit clutch his right shoulder and stagger against the glass partitioned wall.

Tom Grant straightened, shrugged off the feeling of nausea that waved over him from that clout on the cranium, and stepped into the shop. His grey eyes turned to Mortimer, who was still huddled against the floor, groaning.

"Did he hit—"

"Look out!" screamed the blonde.

Grant spun around. The Bandit had risen. He was clutching his gun with both hands, while blood from his shoulder wound messed the grey carpeting.

"I'll finish it this time!" he mouthed harshly. Hot lead spat Grant's way.

He flopped. From the floor his gun gave out its brief song of death. This time the Dream Bandit crumpled for good.

The detective stood over the dead killer, while clumping footsteps down the hall told him the watchman had finally awakened. He rushed in, groggy-eyed.

"What's up?" he asked. He saw the dead man and gulped. His red face went white.

The blonde was busy dialing headquarters. She got the Old Man and handed the detective the phone.

"Grant reporting," he snapped. "Want ed you to be the first to know, Chief. The Dream Bandit is fast asleep, for good. And guess who it turns out to be!"

"Who?" The watchman and the blonde cashier chorused.

"Smooth Talbert!" Grant told them all. "And we thought he got his in Chi three years ago! Yeah, Chief, he was all dressed up in a monkey-suit and a brown curly wig. Even had that scar painted up, so's nobody would spot him."

"Say, Chief, I want to give some credit to a plucky girl here. She, and a guy named Mortimer, kept him around while I was taking a little nap outside the window. Yeah, he smacked me from behind, but didn't take time to finish the job because he knew there was a watchman on the place. He had probably cased the joint before, on a cold prowl, and knew he had to hurry the job up."

"What's that, Chief?" He broke into a wide grin. "Oh, that's all right. Save the orchids. Just doing my duty!"

He hung up, still grinning.

Mortimer, who hadn't been hit, but just playing possum, said wonderingly, "There's one thing I can't figure. I know they always send out a second guy to heckle. The studio, I mean. What happened to him?"

Grant lit a cigarette and shrugged.

"Both of us ought to have guessed that," he told him. "Talbert, alias the Dream Bandit, found out they were hunting a double to use on the program, so he volunteered for the job. They picked him, because after all, nobody could look more like the Dream Bandit than he could!"

Murder's Sure Substitute

By Stewart Toland

(Continued from page 42)

were somewhere close. That miserable picture in the paper told me Dr. Service was afraid you'd be identified from a better one. Even without the letters, eventually we would have found you."

"Tell me, Leo, when did you first know something was wrong?"

"Why it was the sheets. I've been in a hospital a whale of a long time now. I've seen fellows beg to leave their feet out, or to have the covers mussed. I've done a little begging myself. Could we get those nurses to undo their fancy turned-down corners? No sirree!"

"So the moment I saw those pink sheets

dragging on the floor, I knew Mary Fitzgerald wasn't a trained nurse. If she wasn't, why would Dr. Service be pretending she was? Why wouldn't he have a trained nurse? There isn't so much labor shortage that the Van Winston millions couldn't get one, unless Dr. Service didn't want one, didn't want trained eyes to watch what he was doing. That started me to thinking and noticing."

He grinned. "I guess it doesn't pay to start a sailor to thinking, not with a three-day pass on his hands and nothing to do."

From Killer to Post

By Rex Whitechurch



Strainer had spotted sinister Old Lady Cooley as the killer of her pretty niece. But the city's dicks wouldn't make a pinch. And it seemed that the only way to get action was to catch her red-handed in a second crime—the murder of Detective Strainer.

THE coroner had performed the post on the little blonde victim of the hit-and-run driver. He'd said for everyone's benefit:

"There's a place on the skull that couldn't possibly have resulted from wheels of the car or jarring on the pavement. I can't understand. I'd say, off hand, it looks like the kid met up with foul play."

My latest employer, the young Marine officer who'd been engaged to marry Clare Alridge, followed me out into the hallway of the city morgue. "Do you know what her aunt said when she was here?" he asked.

I nodded. "Of course. That's one of the first things I found out."

It wasn't right he should be shocked now, again. But there was no way around the issue. "I was going to say," I stalled, "it's not quite time—er—"

"Go ahead and spill it," Captain Parker Hopfield said. "She gave the coroner a load of background stuff concerning me. She said my father jilted her when she

was a young woman, after practically leading her to the altar. She said I was no good. She objected to our marriage, said she'd drive Clare out if she insisted on going ahead with it. And she did drive her out. For three weeks she worked in a sheet music store, playing the piano. She never would give me her address."

"Did the old lady tell the truth?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. My father did jilt her. But he found out she was after his money. The Cooleys never had a dime. Bonita bragged she was going to kick him out as soon as she'd obtained a hold on his fortune. Now old Bonita is trying to make it appear that she objected to me because I'm not stable. But there's something else, Strainer."

Leading him out to my blue convertible, I got him in and drove him over to his hotel. He had an elaborate apartment.

It seemed strange that Clare Alridge had sought lodgings at the run-down Edmond Street Hotel, where she'd lived

three weeks. Under a bogus name, she'd worn glasses and dressed simply, going and coming from work in plain print dresses.

Hopfield waved me to a chair; he was badly shaken. His blue eyes reflected the mental anguish he was experiencing at the moment. I sat down, watched him pace the floor. Sweat moistened his face despite that it was a bitter cold day.

"She was coldly and deliberately murdered," he said. "The coroner confirmed my worst suspicions. Bonita Cooley's a scheming old witch. Clare's parents are dead. Her aunt raised her. She had a hard time of it, even then. The old woman was always short of funds.

"I don't know how she lived unless the money came from an insurance policy. She married late in life. The man died rather suddenly, five years ago. Clare was very fond of him. He was a Spanish-American War veteran."

"What about this chauffeur who worked for the old lady so long?" I asked.

"He's driving a taxi now. When Bonita Cooley wants him, she rides in the cab. She said it was a way to help the war manpower shortage. Something funny about that, too."

I was willing to admit that myself. Only this morning the girl had been found in Lover's Lane, south of town. Evidently she'd been walking when struck by a car. She had been dead several hours. The fact that Lover's Lane was far from the residential district had caused my client's doubt, and he'd come straight to me. We'd gone to the morgue, where he'd again identified the body.

"Clare Altridge was insured for ten thousand dollars," I said. "The amount doubles in case of accidental death. The beneficiary is none other than Bonita Cooley."

The Marine captain stared at me dumbfounded. His eyes darkened. Firm lines appeared at the corners of his mouth. He turned pale even as I gazed at him.

"When did you learn this?" he asked.

"On the phone, from the morgue," I said. "You've hired me to run down the hit-and-run driver. But I'm not looking for a stranger, Captain. I mean a stranger to the girl. She knew the killer; she was riding with him. She wouldn't have been that far out in the country alone, just walking. The weather's extremely bad. The snow's deep, and it's still falling. It was falling last night and the temperature dropped. Nope, I'm hitting this case from the angle of murder, if you must know."

I left him there, went downstairs, and loafed around the lobby. There was no hurry. You couldn't crack this case in a

minute. It had been carefully planned. It would take careful work to break it.

A WOMAN came tottering across the tile floor, stopped, leaned on a black-thorn cane and glowered at me through the thick lenses of her nose glasses.

"I saw you at the morgue," she said, "with that good-for-nothing Parker Hopfield. You're a private detective. Well, let me tell you something. You'd better get your money in advance."

"Madame," I said gravely, "I don't need your advice. I know Hopfield. He's a gentleman and a soldier. He has rendered valuable service to his country."

"You don't know it all, do you?" she sneered. Then she walked away and left me standing there, wondering what had ever possessed her to make a statement like that. In my own mind I was sure she knew more about the murder than she cared to let on. She was doing a swell job of stalling.

By night I'd made a few more discoveries. I returned to Hopfield's apartment. The monkey-faced chauffeur who'd worked for Bonita Cooley so long, who'd been in the family before her husband died, drove Cab 47. He'd been fond of Clare Altridge, and had often driven her in the family car.

But the man had a police record. He had been picked up several times for speeding and had served a hitch in federal prison for bootlegging. All this was a long time before he'd entered Bonita Cooley's employ.

I'd caught him watching me furtively. And there was a cop who walked a beat near the hotel who frequently stopped at his cab to talk to him. It was obvious that the cop didn't like me.

I wondered if the old woman had set her driver to keeping an eye on me. No doubt she'd go that far, having been reckless enough to stop me in the hotel lobby and make a fuss over nothing.

At least to me it was nothing. I was sure she was stalling, to get into conversation with me. I'd turned her away in a manner calculated to disgruntle her. No doubt she was suspicious. If she were the culprit in the case, she was having me shadowed. I'd heard she was going to engage a private detective to investigate her niece's death.

Hopfield listened, pacing the floor while I unloaded my information. I didn't have much, but I had the key to Clare Altridge's hotel room. I meant to go over there at once, to see if anything could be found to give us a better lead in the case. I walked to the street window, stared down at the swirling snow. I could

see the top of the line of cabs in front of the hotel.

"If you take a taxi," I warned, "be sure it's not 47. I'm going over to the hotel where Clare lived. Be careful."

I PAUSED under the marquee. A figure sat hunched over the wheel of 47. The starter's shrill whistle moved one cab away and 47 closer. He was four cabs back. I didn't think he could break through the line to follow me. I signaled the starter, who whistled number 44 up for me. I knew I was being watched by the monkey-man, but what could he do about it. The whistle tore through the silent snow again, and my cab rolled away.

"The Edmond Street Hotel," I said.

The driver clicked the flag. I heard the clack-clack of the meter. Lolling in the tonneau, I analyzed the situation. This was a funny case. Since accepting it I'd hardly taken time to eat. The police had been working on it, too. I wondered what discoveries they'd made. It wasn't reasonable to believe they'd been standing still. Would they delve into the old woman's past? I was sure there was enough in her background to reward them, at least in part.

The ten grand insurance was another thing. Old Bonita needed funds. Twenty thousand dollars would be sufficient compensation for one of her type, if she'd murdered Clare Altridge.

I needed only one thing to clinch the case against her. I felt sure I'd get it, sooner or later. What about the sudden death of her husband—the Spanish-American War veteran? He'd been insured, too. Was it possible—I didn't want to think about that now. If it were worth while I'd come back to it.

The snowfall was heavier now. The white ribbons scintillated in the orange glow of the street lamps. It was a dull grey haze, like a fog descending on the street. Then we reached the Edmond Street Hotel. My breath curled into frost as I paid the driver and instructed him to come back in thirty minutes. The temperature was steadily dropping.

I clumped up the wooden steps to the lamplit entrance. Maybe I was letting myself in for something. I wondered.

Straight through the cluttered smeary lobby I strolled, without regard to the few loafers who occupied chairs. One man stood at the desk, but he wasn't interested in me. Nobody was paying any attention, and for this I was grateful. The creaking lift carried me to the second floor.

I found Room 227. The key on the tag rattled in the lock. I pictured the little

blonde living here, alone. Avoiding companionship, seeking to hide her real identity, because she wished to spare her sweetheart the pain of knowing she'd been cast off because of him. It was a cinch she'd been guided by that intense desire. There was no other motive for the disguise she'd worn.

The windows of the apartment were closed. The room had a musty smell and needed an airing. The wallpaper was cracked, dirty, peeled off in places. The red carpet was threadbare. I rummaged through the drawers of a dressing table. Nothing but flimsy underthings came to light, a few cosmetics, a pair of stockings.

I found several business cards, one bearing a phone number in purple ink. Other specimens of the girl's script turned up. It seemed she'd used the same fountain pen. I made a mental note of the purple ink and estimated the light touch of the pen on paper. The girl's particular touch.

A moment later I discovered an unfinished letter to Captain Hopfield, but it contained nothing of importance to the investigation. I stuck the letter in my pocket.

Replacing everything as I'd found it in the bureau drawers, I glanced into the dressing-table mirror. I saw in this a small metal phone-box on the wall behind me. It was about shoulder high and near the door.

I crossed to this and scrutinized the wallpaper carefully. Several queer little designs were sketched on the wall, a duck, an apple, a comic face. Then I gasped and bent forward eagerly. I was staring at the number 47, the name of the cab company, and the phone number. Here at last was something I could get my teeth into. I meant to hang on.

A connecting link! Definitely. It couldn't be disputed. At some time or other the girl had called her aunt's chauffeur and been driven by him. 47 in purple ink. I knew Clare Altridge had set the number down. Well, now he'd have some tall explaining to do.

AS I SKEWED around from the phone, the hall door came slowly open. I could see the swinging door in the looking-glass. A man was gingerly stepping across the threshold. Old Bonita, with her glasses gleaming, leaning on her blackthorn, loitered in the hall behind him.

I saw her skeletal finger pointing at me. She wore a heavy black yarn shawl around her shoulders. Powder adhered to her thin face like a coating of streaked flour.

The man's eyes were sharp, beady. There was nothing surprised in his expression. There was nothing surprised in the old woman's expression. It was quite obvious they'd known of my presence in the apartment.

"What're you doing here?" he asked. His voice had a cryptic note.

"Just looking," I said.

"You have no right in there," Bonita Cooley said.

"Why not?" I stalled.

"This apartment was occupied by my late niece. Her things are still here. The rent's paid in advance for another week. She left it that way. What right do you have to enter the apartment?"

"As much as you have," I bit out savagely. "Who you think you are, the Queen of Sheba?"

"I am the poor child's aunt, and I'm protecting her interests."

"You should've done that in life," I snapped.

Sizing the man up the first time didn't give me anything. I never banked much on first impressions. In the shamus business you just don't. Once I met a guy who looked like a tramp, but he turned out to be the greatest doctor of surgery in the world.

This man before me was short, wide, with an aggressive chin—and a chip on his shoulder. He was what I'd always imagined an old Pinkerton detective looked like. He wore a stout bowler, a plaid suit, a bright red four-in-hand.

The black-clad old lady slid silently into the room. "What've you found?" she asked bitterly. "You can't leave here until you've been searched."

This amazed and amused me. "By whom?" I sneered.

"You come across now," the dick said. "I'm not wasting time with a down-at-heel shamus. If you wanna play rough, I like to play that way. You do what she says, turn your pockets wrongside out."

"Try and make me," I said, coldly impudent. I didn't like him, I didn't like the old woman, and I was ready for anything. But I wasn't as brave as I sounded. That big gorilla was no push over.

"Take him apart, Gabe," the old woman directed icily.

Gabe grinned. He began to shed his coat.

"You want that cigar rammed down your throat?" I sneered. "Maybe you like to play rough, but you don't know the ropes. I've had a gun on you ever since you entered this room. Believe me, pal, I know how to shoot through the pocket. Put your coat back on before you take cold."

He glared at me dubiously. The old woman's eyes flamed through those thick lenses. Her mouth fell open. Bloodless as her face was, there was suddenly a tinge of color. Gabe began to slip his arms back into the sleeves of his plaid coat.

"Get out of my way," I said, now revealing the automatic clasped in my hand. "I have an appointment with the police. I don't think you're going to relish this, Grandmother Bonita," I said.

"I'm not your grandmother," she said. "And if you think you can scare me—"

But she was scared. One look at her would've have told a novice that. I slowly edged around her, grabbed the tagged key out of the door and raised my hat. "You and your gumshoe come around and see me sometime, when I'm at home," I invited cordially. "You're such delightful company. Never a dull moment."

"We'll see who laughs last," Bonita Cooley rasped at me.

I chuckled, eased down the dim-lit corridor. Gabe came to the door and watched me take my departure. His eyes burned a hole in my back.

I dropped in at Central Police, talked to Wilson Peabody of Homicide. That guy could come up with more clues in a single dive than anyone in the department.

Peabody was short and fat, five-by-five. But I didn't have anything against guys five-by-five. But Peabody didn't have anything for me save contempt. He didn't always feel that way toward me; it was only in this case.

"Quit playing for keeps," he warned. "Keep an open mind. Lay off the old lady. If you don't, you'll wake up holding the sack—an empty one. She has too much on the ball, fella. Leave her to the department. We know how to deal with her kind."

"This guy you call Gabe is a shamus imported on four hours' notice, a good one. Of course it's a gesture on Bonita Cooley's part. She wants to fool somebody. It's because Hopfield's got you working on the case."

"The only one Gabe Brown's interested in is you. Maybe he'll keep you busy long enough to let us break this case without you spoiling everything for us."

He was rushing from his modernistic office as he spoke. He refused to comment on his plans, didn't give me an inkling of where he was going in such haste. I was dismissed on the sidewalk and took a cab back to the hotel to see my client. The only thing I'd learned was that homicide regarded the death of Clare Altridge as a definite case of first degree murder.

HOPFIELD was in. I could see the lights burning in his front apartment as I unloaded in the snow before the hotel's ornate facade. For a moment I loafed under the marquee, trying to spot Bonita Cooley's monkey-man. Cab 47 wasn't in the line.

I went up on one of the lifts, got off on the seventh floor. Twice I rang the bell without getting an answer. If Hopfield was in, he was asleep.

I was about to turn away when I heard the radio. It was softly on, a program of music. I turned back, rang the bell again. Still he didn't come to the door. Suddenly I decided to go in and wait. I twisted the knob. It turned. There was nobody in the sumptuous, spacious room.

I sat down in a jade green chair, dropped my hat on the floor. A strange, uneasy feeling came over me. I tried to think, to sum up the evidence I'd procured at the Edmond Street Hotel, the purple ink clue, the visit of the old woman and her shamus to the dead girl's apartment. I sought to make myself believe I'd obtained damning proof of the old battle-ax's guilt. But nothing clicked. There was something missing. I was gradually sinking into a deep fog.

The door opened slowly; I heard someone enter the living room. He came cautiously from the vestibule, smoking a cigarette. I got up, skewed around. Hopfield smiled at me.

There was something in his smile reassuring to my jaded nerves. "I think I have something," I said. "The police are working on the case. It won't be long now till we'll know. I've proof that the chauffeur contacted the girl at the Edmond Street Hotel."

I explained. He nodded his understanding, seemed nervous. He put on a blue robe, hung his coat in a closet, and offered me a cigarette. I declined. He fixed up a couple of drinks. This I accepted. A slug of rye, the very thing I needed.

Grief had certainly done a lot to that guy. He looked like he'd just emerged from an overdone Turkish bath. He crossed to the window and stared down. Snow swirled against the panes. I could hear the wind rattling the storm shutters at the other windows. It was warm, cozy in the room. I produced the unfinished letter from my pocket, spread it out on my knee. I said:

"She was writing you a letter. I didn't read it. Maybe there's something in it, if we study it. Apparently it seems to be just an ordinary missive. I—"

He jerked the letter from my hand. "Damn," he said. "Where did you get this?"

Startled, I scammed his sweaty face. He

was so nervous he was clammy. I told him I'd found the letter among the things in her apartment.

"You didn't leave anything; you didn't miss anything we might need?" he asked.

"No." I shook my head several times. I paced the floor. I reached down, helped myself to a cigarette from the teakwood chest. I strolled to the bathroom. I peered in. The lamps dazzled on the bright green tile. I heard the crinkle of paper. When I looked back at him, he was stuffing it in his pocket.

"I'm glad you found this, Strainer," he said. "It means nothing to the investigation, but it means a lot to me. I'm nervous. I feel as if the devil had hold of me. Something's closing in on us. I'll have to get out for air, to relieve myself of this awful sense of tension. You come back as soon as you learn anything."

He went quickly to the closet, changed his blue robe for the heavy blue tunic he'd worn. He wanted me to leave, but he was being polite about it.

I walked to the door, slued around. "You keep an eye open, Captain," I said. "The old lady's hired a shamus to watch me. She figures it's a swell way to keep checked up on our progress. She's no fool, and she hates you. If she thinks you're too much of a threat, she might try to liquidate you."

"I feel so, myself," he admitted. "I'll be careful, Strainer."

I closed the door behind me and uttered a deep sigh.

Downstairs in the cocktail lounge, I suddenly felt an arm tighten around me. It was my old friend, Detective Sergeant Peabody.

"You stay away from the old woman," he said. He laughed.

"What're you talking about?" I demanded, aroused now since I felt he was making light of me.

"You're a great shamus," he said, amused. "You might track an elephant in a deep snow or a bull moose—but there'd have to be snow."

"Will you explain?" I said, nettled. "I don't like to have anyone make fun of me to my face and not do anything about it."

"I have nothing to add to what I've already said." He offered me a cigar. I accepted, thinking hard. It wasn't his nature to kid with a guy. What was behind it?

"Sure, the old woman draws down twenty grand for the girl's murder," he said. "We can't get around it. Already she's having a good time in anticipation. Look, over at that reserved table. She's getting drunker than a fool."

He nodded his head and I stared in the

direction he indicated. There sat old Bonita Cooley, her spectacles gleaming, a cocktail glass to her lips. But her face was as bloodless as ever, white with the powder she used. She was alone. If she saw me, she didn't make the fact known.

"I don't get it," I admitted. "I must be dense. Why don't you arrest her, Sergeant? I can hand you a few little items that'll help stick her, if you wish."

Peabody smiled up at me. He looked solid, substantial in his plain blue serge, his pinkish face aglow. He was more of a family doctor type than a hard-boiled homicide man. The soft throb and hammer of music from the white-jacketed orchestra came to me.

"You can't hand me anything, pal, to clinch the case against her," he said flatly.

I stepped back, regarded him quizzically. "Maybe you don't know—

"I know what you know and more," he rejoined. "Still we haven't the grounds to arrest her." He suddenly turned and left me standing there looking like a fool.

IT WAS eight-thirty and I decided to report to Hopfield. New developments in the case had sent my efforts tumbling into a cocked hat. I was so eager to break the news to the Marine captain that, after ringing the bell, I didn't wait for him to open the door. I barged in, stopped in the vestibule, and kicked off my rubbers.

Something struck my nostrils. Cordite. You don't have to hit me with an ax when I smell cordite. I went scurrying into the living room, with one rubber on and one off. Then I stopped, gasped, and cursed. I was too late. Somebody had already beaten me to Hopfield, only the news they'd dished out to him had been the last he'd ever hear.

He was lying huddled up on the floor, his knees bent, his arms outflung. There was an automatic pistol near his right hand. Blood curled into a little sparkling stream from a bullet hole in his head.

I dropped on my knees beside him, scared, my heart drumming. The room was turned upside down, chairs tipped over, the teakwood chest had been kicked spinning against the wall, one floor lamp was down and still burning against the red pile rug. Papers were scattered everywhere. The drawers of his commode were pulled out, ties, shirts and underwear were arranged in a neat pile beside a straight chair. On the chair was an open suitcase.

A sound in the bathroom disturbed me. I got up, dusted my knees, felt for the gun in my shoulder holster. The sound came again, someone came walking in the door. I gasped as the old woman stepped

calmly out, her glasses gleaming ominously. Behind her was her boy stooge, Gabe Brown.

I calculated the distance to the phone. But the presence of an ugly-looking automatic in Gabe's right hand detained me. He thrust it out and stepped forward.

"Go on, shamus," he said, "use the phone. You might as well call the cops as me do it."

"You're pretty cold to be a killer with a fresh job still kicking behind him," I snarled. I moved toward the phone. He jiggled the gun, smiled, showed gold teeth. The old lady stepped around him, came to the phone and took it out of my hand.

"Police Headquarters?" she asked, a second later. "Come at once to Room 707, Astor Hotel. There's been a shooting. This is Bonita Cooley speaking, and I shan't budge until you get here."

Amazed, I glowered at her. I was trying to find words. Gabe pushed me out of the way, placed an arm around the old woman's shoulders.

"You dumb shamus," he said. "If it hadn't been for you, this case would've been busted hours ago."

"Says you," I growled. "Now I suppose you'll try to stall out of this one. Wait till Detective Sergeant Peabody gets here. He just finished telling me downstairs a while ago he couldn't get enough on you to warrant arresting you, but when he sees this, your latest, I guess he'll change his mind."

Gabe pawed me again. This time I swung at him. I caught him a short one behind the right ear and he spun away from me. He struck the wall, cascaded its full length, trying to stand up. He finally went down. I grabbed my pistol, swung it so it covered them, and backed off toward the bed. I was fed up with this penny-ante stuff.

"Make a move," I said to Gabe, "and I'll blast you full of holes, fella."

"Oh, you mustn't," the old woman hissed. To me her hissing was like that of a coiled rattler. "You don't understand. You—"

"I simply understand I'm playing with killers," I rapped. "I'm going to use killer methods. Kindly stay as you are till the law gets here. And you, Mr. Brown, drop that automatic."

He let the gun slide from his hand. Just then rushing footfalls came from the corridor. Sergeant Wilson Peabody thrust his short solid frame through the vestibule. His face was pink, impassive. Behind him was a man I judged to be the house detective.

"Start talking," he said to Gabe, who was pawing his face, on the floor with his back to the wall.

"Oke," Gabe said. "We came up here just as the shot was fired that killed Hopfield. I had to horn in. Hopfield is the culprit in the hit-and-run case. He was using this monkey here to destroy evidence, figuring he'd fetch it in and he could get rid of it. This afternoon we caught Rube Strainer, a nice, quiet-spoken little shamus, going through the girl's room over at the Edmond Street Hotel.

"One man knew who killed Clare Altridge and told Mrs. Cooley. That man was devoted to the girl."

"Yeah," I sneered, "talk's cheap. How about some substantiation?"

"Shut up," Peabody rasped. "Go on, Gabe."

"You want the reason Hopfield killed her? Sure, I'll give it to you. She wouldn't tell him where she was living, because she wasn't going to marry him. She'd done a little checking on her own and found out what her aunt told her about the man was true. He was a drinker and unstable. He was like his father who jilted her aunt practically at the church.

"He hired a drive-it-yourself. There's proof of that in his pocket, a ticket dated the very day the girl was slain. Furthermore, this chump turned a letter over to him found in the girl's room. She hadn't finished writing it. In the missive she said she'd changed her mind. That's all,

but it's enough when you couple it all together."

He got up, dusted his knees and waddled over to the bathdoom door. "Come here, Sergeant Peabody," he said.

I almost beat Peabody to the door. Lying on the green tile, shot in the chest, his shirt covered with blood, was old lady Cooley's chauffeur.

"There's the little fellow that stopped Hopfield's clock. They shot it out. He came up here to kill Hopfield to square accounts for Clare Altridge." He paused, then added, smiling at me, "I found the drive-it-yourself when he rented the car; found blood on the wheels and the bumper, and blood on the front cushion. Hopfield's the guy that rented the car under a bogus name, but the dealer identified him from a picture I took over there."

Well, can you beat that? You know what Barnum said! But wait a minute. I'd known about the rented car angle, that's what took me to Hopfield's apartment when I found his body. It was the new development I'd learned at police headquarters.

But that guy, Gabe Brown, was a real shamus, no fooling. Old Bonita had been playing for keeps. She'd got the best available. Gabe had learned something else, too. Funny how this turned out.

My client wasn't a Marine captain. He was a four-flusher, an impostor. He'd been wearing the uniform to impress the girl he knew he was going to lose.

Well, Barnum, I salute thee!



Your Country Is Still at War . . . Are You?

Jailbreak Jackpot

By E. C. Marshall

All those calaboose refugees needed to unlock a twenty-grand hoard was the key—to the death-house door.



on the second tier in the state Big House, the deed had seemed impossible. But Fergus Thorne, small-time, but clever murderer, knew that little was impossible to men of action who had nothing to lose. Certainly he, of all men, condemned to a living death, could lose little more.

Laughing scornfully, Thorne had taunted his cell companion, Stash Guiles, into something resembling a steely resolve.

Stash reviewed his small tally of minor killings, before giving in. Another lifer, he knew the consequences of a balked jail break could not extend by one second the eternity of his damnation. It was easy after that, easy to disregard the harsh realities of a dozen thudding guns should detection be too early. The philosophy of certain doom from any quarter, any time, any year, somehow dulled his fear of mere death.

It had gone like clockwork. The appointed time, the appointed place, the swift, raging burst of the first step. For the two trusties, the preliminary steps were as simple to arrange and execute as the buttering of a piece of bread.

As the pair left the threshold of the administration building and dashed across the narrow yard through the gathering gloom of night, a twinge of fear ripped through the stripped confines of Stash Guiles' mind. It was not fright at the sound of bullets slapping against the sandy soil of the yard, nor the sharp terror driven through any soul by the rising whine of the prison siren. The brittle armor of an enduring quasi-courage laid on an atom at a time in thirty years of crime warded that off with ease.

The slashing thread of a tower-mount-

THE break had been very well planned. At first, in its original conception, born in the low tones of two desperate men huddling in the cold of a stone-walled cell

ed searchlight coming down at a steep angle toward the running fugitives lit a gleam of light in that tired brain.

Stash had realized suddenly he had more to fear from Fergus Thorne than from the whole paraphernalia of the state apparatus. The vague synthesis of the law, pictured in his mind as a vision of squads of ranked police, platoons of marching, blue-clad ranks, a montage of noose and gun, judge and jury, gave way abruptly to a mental chromo of Thorne's wide, florid, poker-faced visage.

He almost stopped, almost turned and surrendered. But they were too close to freedom and their kind of victory. Thorne's swift feet had reached the running board of the car that brought visitors daily from the railroad station ten miles away. He swung his powerful body into the driver's seat, unleashed the sleeping life of the motor.

As the long, specially built sedan swung round and faced its streamlined nose toward the gaping outer portals, Guiles was caught in the line of the open, right hand front door. The gentle nudge of the creeping car made his decision for him. A giant hand closing over his wrist, pulling him none too gently into the front seat, completed the crossing of that particular Rubicon.

FOR an instant the machine hesitated, gathering speed. The huge hand of Fergus Thorne relaxed its grip, fumbled in the darkness and returned with the cold gift of lead-spitting metal.

Stash took the gun, fired a shot aimlessly backward. The glass of the rear window splintered simultaneously under the impact of two bullets, one coming from inside the car, the other from the open door of the administration office. Then, with an outraged shriek, gears clashed into high. The machine hurled itself forward, passed the gates in a split second and vanished, a darkly gleaming projectile, into the night.

The road was clear. Fergus Thorne had known it would be. A state prison ten miles from a railway station, twenty from the nearest city, isolated like an eagle's crag, was no center of traffic.

As he guided the purring car down the broad, macadamized highway, his brain thrust the immediate considerations of escape into a far background.

He had minutes now, in which to think, to plan ahead, to determine how to use the \$20,000 hidden by Stash Guiles and an accomplice before the abrupt legal termination of their last safe-cracking, cop-killing venture.

The trembling of the creature on the seat beside him brought a sudden sense of annoyance. Again the huge hand fumbled in the darkness.

"Give me the rod, Stash." The tones were calm, deliberate, full of confidence. There was every reason to preserve the thin-edged courage of the other man.

The gun changed hands, was replaced in the side pocket of the driver's prison slops. For perhaps two minutes the car sped along in silence. Glancing back, Thorne could see no pursuing flash of the headlights of other cars. There was nothing but the aimless circling of many searchlights, springing from the bowels of the sprawling prison.

"Now, let's get this straight." Thorne settled back in his seat, dragged a battered cigarette between his lips, lit it with the electric lighter from the dashboard. "You and this Stewart guy, crack a safe, lift \$20,000 in unmarked greens, stow it in a safety deposit box in Stevensville, walk out of the bank, down to the railroad stations, bump into some waiting dicks and get decorated with wrist jewelry."

"Yeah," Stash nodded wearily. He lit a cigarette for himself. "Only Stewart didn't get as much as I did. It was his first offense, my tenth. Stewart got two years."

Thorne smiled grimly to himself. "And the mastermind got life. Lucky you stumbled on a live-wire like me, Stash."

"Well, we were smart enough to slap a five-year rental on that box. I don't never take chances." Guiles shifted restlessly in his seat.

A long-drawn chuckle came from behind the wheel. "Original, Stash. You got patience."

"Well, it worked twice before. After things blew over, we'd come back, take out the dough and scram. Far as I know the cops never tumbled, not even now."

Thorne knew the rest of the story. Stewart was alive. Where, Stash didn't know exactly. The last he'd heard from Stewart was that he'd been working in a war plant in Stevensville. What Thorne knew was that Stewart, like Stash, had the combination numbers to the safety deposit box, but that the money couldn't be

claimed until both of them showed up at the bank together.

Thorne also knew what he had to do. Just ask around Stevensville's war plants. When he'd gotten to Stewart, slip the twenty grand out of town and start his long, cautious, overland route over the Canadian border to some kind of safety.

There was one more consideration, of course—Stash Guiles. He didn't need Guiles anymore. His companion had told him all he'd need to know. It would be a cinch to take on the moniker Stash had used when stowing the dough in the safety deposit box:

Thirty minutes of fast traveling had put them at a considerable distance from the State Prison. As the car approached an intersection with the main state highway, Thorne slowed it down and stopped at a little fork in the road. For an instant the silence was oppressive, then two huge hands left the wheel of the car and crept slowly toward Stash Guiles' throat, in the darkness.

"Thorne, there's one more thing—" Guiles' thin voice rose from the other side of the car, cracked abruptly as it was suddenly throttled, and died in a sort of diminishing rattle. Stash never knew what hit him. A tiny, machinelike click stabbed the silence, then the little man, lifted half out of his seat by the violence of the attack, slipped back, his head lolling at a hideous angle to his shoulders.

THORNE knew there was little point in delay now. He drove the car off the road into a deep thicket. He returned afoot and scuffed the road shoulder with his feet to erase the marks of the tires. As he made off cross-country for the main highway, he cast but a single glance backward. They'd be a long time finding the car, he knew.

The problem of fresh clothes to replace his prison garb and a car to get him to Stevensville was a mere item on the agenda. Fergus Thorne solved his problem within fifteen minutes of creeping up the side of the state highway, by stopping a car simply by throwing himself in front of it.

Then as the machine ground to a halt and its motor was angrily shut off by the driver, Thorne acted. A growling, streak of lightning hurled itself at the car door, tore it open, repeated its performance with the neck of the driver. The entire interlude lasted exactly seven minutes.

Thorne drove the car slightly off the road, dragged the body into another thicket, divested it of its clothing, which he donned himself. As he drove off down the highway, Thorne didn't even bother looking back. Bodies hidden in thick

copses usually took a long time to find. He figured he had twenty-four hours to get his hands on the all-important money. Plenty of time.

Stevensville was thirty miles away. He had to stop once for gas at a roadside station, luckily open, but the A and B cards of the owner, coupled with a well-laden wallet gave him nearly a full tank. The car roared into Stevensville a little short of dawn.

Over a cup of coffee at one of the small town's doughnut joints, Thorne got practically everything he needed in the way of information from the individual running the place. Stevensville was a small town, with a bank and a war plant. A greasy copy of the town directory, supplied under the wall phone, noted a William Stewart in care of the plant.

Putting the booklet back in its place, Thorne smiled grimly. There would be no mistaking his man. Stash Guiles had given him an accurate description. Barrel-chested, six foot in height, a giant of a man.

Thorne spent the next three hours refurbishing his appearance. He put in at a barber shop, gathered some further local news and information. At nine-thirty he drove out to the plant, a low-lying collection of many buildings just five minutes out of town by car.

The administration office was easy to deceive. Thorne represented himself as a lawyer, asked to see William Stewart. The clerk behind the pine counter hesitated a moment, then drew out a personnel book, with full-length photographs of the employees.

He opened a page, showed it to Thorne, then passed to another. Again the escaped convict smiled grimly. There was no mistaking Stewart. Thorne waited a few minutes until Stewart came in from Number Three Building, sat down with him in a small anteroom.

Thorne had rehearsed his proposition several times back in the prison. So much time to get to the bank, so much time emptying the box and for a getaway to the railroad station. Stewart listened for several minutes in silence to the quick, hurried explanation. Finally he got up, nodded.

"OK, wait for me here. I'll take a sick

leave. We can be out of town in an hour. They can send me my availability certificate later." Grinning broadly he walked out of the office.

Thorne took no chances. He sat with his hand in one overcoat pocket, clutching a gun. For five minutes no one entered the room. Then suddenly the door was flung open.

Even before the Pinewood door had crashed wide, Thorne knew he had made a mistake somewhere. The buried gun came leaping out, spat three bullets in quick succession. Then he leaped to the window, to find it being pushed open with a long stick.

Thorne whirled, fired another bullet aimlessly. He might have had a chance if attack had come from only a single quarter. Before a half-dozen bullets had hurled him flat on the floor, Thorne realized the efficacy of the pincers movement.

Dying men require little more than the satisfaction of some idle curiosity. As they sat him up on the bench beside the window, Stewart came in behind more company guards. Through a bloody mist Thorne beckoned feebly.

"Stash told me you were straight, that you'd never rat on a pal . . ." A spasm of pain convulsed Thorne's features. Then, "You stinking . . ."

William Stewart looked at him grimly. "You're a little confused," he said. "Sort of a double mistake." He pointed to one of the guards standing by. "Bill here's the guy you wanted, not me."

Mistake? A queer pang shot through the dying man as the echo of some words Stash Guiles had spoken back in the car came back. "Thorne, there's one more thing—" Stash hadn't trusted him, had kept something back, something important—and simple. Something he'd tripped up on because it was too obvious.

Stewart hadn't finished. "Bill went straight after that bank job. The company took him on as a guard." He pointed again.

Thorne raised his eyes, took a good look at a man whose photograph he'd also seen, barrel-chested, big, at least a six-footer. Then the simple detail occurred to him. Stash had never told him William Stewart was a Negro.



The man Jim Torren was guarding got a kick from that roller coaster thrill-ride—a killing kick from a hideout gun. And unless Jim wanted to be taken for a ride himself, he had to find a quick way to break down that . . .

Murder-Go-Round

By Theodore Pine



EX-MARINE JIM TORREN could take a joke, but that big-shot boss of his, Randolph Lessit, sometimes went way out of bounds.

Jim was thinking that, and staring out of the window at the noisy evening crowd down at Santa Monica pier.

"Not much like the beach at Guadalucañal," he mused, grimly. His cool gray eyes hardened.

Just then the door labeled "Mike Flabbin, Mgr. Associated Concessions" swung open. Millionaire Randy Lessit eased his bulk out.

Jim removed his elbows from the sill and brought his rangy six-foot-one in line with his boss's dumpy turkey-trot.

"Something wrong?" he asked. Lessit's cherubic mouth made pouting sounds.

Lessit blinked his jovial eyes, and chuckled, "No, no, no!"

He pushed out onto the garish, light-splayed beachway. When Jim sauntered after, he found him buying a pink ice cream cone like any kid.

"Have one!" Lessit urged. "Now we'll ride on the Big Dipper!" He clapped his fat hands together eagerly.

Jim glanced up at the metallic tangle of nightmarish windings, hairpin turns, and drops. He groaned.

"You still ride that thing, boss?"

He had only been given his medical discharge last week, and hoped his old boss might have given up some of his vices in the eighteen months he'd been overseas. Lessit owned a controlling interest in the Associated Concessions, and found it necessary to investigate his interests every Saturday.

Jim always thought, with a wry grin, that he came down to the beach mainly

to ride the Big Dipper! And, as Lessit's bodyguard, he'd have to ride it too—like it or not.

"Yup!" grinned Lessit. "Every time I come down to talk things over with Flabbin."

A frown flitted over his jolly face, but it vanished in a wave of anticipative pleasure as they reached the steps leading to the roller coaster's loading platform.

Jim climbed in the front seat, wry-faced. Lessit oozed in after. The young Irish cop talking with the ride attendant, saluted Lessit, grinning.

"Still riding it, I see!"

"Yup. By the way, Rossiter, this is my—er—secretary, Jim Torren. Just back from overseas. Medical discharge. Jim, meet Tommy Rossiter, our new cop!"

Jim's eyes met the young policeman's honest, blue orbs. He liked that smile and the set of his jaw.

"Wounded?" Rossiter asked.

"You might say that." Jim's jaw set. He didn't like talking about it.

"Y'know, Rossiter," Lessit chuckled, "It's Jim here who's so nuts about the Dipper. I only ride to please him!" He winked broadly. "Sometimes I think he wants to kill me off! He knows he comes in for a big chunk when I kick off!"

JIM grabbed hold of the iron railing with both hands, and shut his eyes. His palms were moist with sweat as, with a violent jerk, the car moved ahead.

He wouldn't tell Lessit, but he didn't like this. It brought those black clouds hovering over his mind again. The artificial glare and noise was a little too much like the rattle of guns and the bursting of bombs on those hell-islands in the South Pacific.

He was getting over it, sure. But, like the psychiatry docs told him, that last big push, and that big shell splashing his buddy to fragments right in front of his eyes, did things to his mind.

He'd be okay. They promised him that. But it would take time. There might be repercussions. So he ought to take it very easy. Avoid excitement.

Jim had a tender spot for his old boss. A lovable crackpot, who'd never really bothered to grow up! Pink ice cream cones! Roller coasters!

He clung to the rail like grim death, listening to the clank and rattle of the empty string of cars behind them. They were the only ones on this string of cars, the tail-end string. Ahead of them girls shrieked, as the cars went into the first easier dips.

The Big Dipper was calculated to shock and surprise. One minute they were flinging wildly around a rakish turn. Then they poised on the brink of a fifty-foot drop.

Jim kept his eyes shut tight. It was bad enough to just feel those dips. Then it seemed like everything was over. The train of cars moved slowly ahead, as if to stop.

Jim opened his eyes just in time to see the car shoot upward like a bullet—and found himself staring right into the blazing red eyes of a gigantic monster.

It was the Monster Slide next door.

A three-hundred-foot dinosaur, with green scales. Tyrannosaurus Rex. His eyes gleamed balefully. His mouth opened to disclose a row of big sharp teeth.

It looked like they were going to climb right up into that monstrous maw, but then the coaster stopped—poising delicately on the brink of the last chasmlike plunge.

Jim heard Lessit give a soft sigh. "He's enjoying himself, anyway!" he thought wryly.

They dropped. They seemed to be sliding off the edge of the world.

Lessit was leaning heavily on Jim's shoulder. Jim's stomach did a flip-flop. As they coasted to a smooth stop, Jim heaved to his feet with a sigh of relief. Lessit just sat there, sagging oddly.

"Hey!" Jim put his hand down to shake him. It came back wet—wet with blood.

"Why, he passed out!" Rossiter, the young cop, exclaimed.

The attendant grinned. "Bet it's one of his corny gags!" he offered.

Jim bent down to see. His breath went in sharply. "No, it isn't!" he said grimly. "He's dead!"

ROSSITER pushed past him. "Shot through the heart!" he told them. "Parkey, keep the crowd away! Put up an out-of-order sign or something!"

He whirled on Jim, who stared at his

boss dumbly. "Torren!" Rossiter snapped. "What you got to say about this?"

"Nothing," Jim said huskily. "I didn't see anything. I had my eyes shut."

The Irish cop made a wrathful sound. "You mean Lessit was shot right in your lap—and you know nothing about it?"

Jim nodded. His mind was fogging-up again.

"Well, of all the . . ."

Jim wasn't listening. Those night-black fogs had tumbled down again, clouding his brain. He couldn't think straight. The whole world was going cockeyed. It was as if he were looking at it through distortion glasses.

Half an hour ago cherubic Lessit had been cracking wise, talking about leaving him a big chunk of dough in his will. Now he was huddled there on the seat, dead. It brought back torturing memories of those death-strewn beaches. That peculiar, sickening stench.

Parkey, the attendant, flexed his brawny muscles, circling around to cut him off. Jim could see a tense, significant look in his squint eyes.

In a shrouded blur he watched Rossiter pull the revolver Jim always carried as part of his job, out of his pocket.

He didn't resist. He couldn't. He couldn't even move.

"This your gun, Torren?" Rossiter snapped.

"Yes."

"Always pack a rod?"

"Sure. I'm—I'm Lessit's bodyguard." Rossiter smiled ironically. Then he examined the gun.

"One shot fired, recently!"

Jim sweated. "Lessit fired it, for a gag!" he screamed. "He shot at a pelican up near Malibu, when—"

The cop's mouth made a thin line. "Not a very good story, Torren."

"It's true! I—I swear."

Jim swabbed his forehead. He shook his head in a vain effort to shake off that blinding black mist. He must think!

"It isn't the gun, so much," Rossiter was saying, almost to himself. "Or even what Lessit said about leaving you a wad of dough in his will. It's"—his blue eyes weaved toward the twisty mass of metal and strung lights—"how could anybody else have possibly done it?"

Jim sweated, but his insides were cold as death. Could it be possible that, when those terrible fogs warped his brain, did he actually know he didn't kill—?

"No!" he shrieked. "I didn't!"

SOMETHING burned dully, far, far in the back of his beaten mind. It was like a baleful red eye. A monstrous eye.



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"The eye!" he yelled. Something clicked in his brain.

"What—" Rossiter began.

"Grab him!" growled Parkey, holding out his hairy arms. "He's gone nuts!"

"What is it, Torren?" the cop snapped.

"Listen!" Jim cried. "You've got to believe me! I've got an idea! A—"

"You know who did it?"

"No. But I—"

"Sorry, Torren, you'll have to tell your story down at headquarters."

And just at that moment, over the blare of the crowd and the carousel's calliope, came the raucous scream of a police siren. A prowler whooshed around the corner.

Cops in blue coats threaded their way.

"It'll be too late!" Jim yelled wildly. "No dice."

Jim gritted his teeth, forcing the fog away momentarily. His glance flashed from the lithe cop to the beetle-browed attendant, Parkey, who blocked his left. In split seconds he decided.

His agile right went out. It splashed across Parkey's startled mug. Parkey grunted, tumbling over the platform.

Jim leaped, avoiding Rossiter's clutching arm. The cops didn't dare fire.

Brushing through the mindless mob, Jim panted up to the entrance to the Monster Slide. He flung a coin at the ticket girl. Waiting, he shot a swift backward glance. The cops, Rossiter in the lead, were hot on his trail.

JIM couldn't wait. He shoved the wizarded ticket-taker aside, and crushed into the full-up elevator which carried the slide patrons up to the top.

"That's all we can take now, folks," the dried-up little ticket-taker told the crowd. "The elevator will be back in just ten minutes!"

There was no way Rossiter could communicate with the attendant at the top. There was only one elevator and no stairs—they'd been blocked off.

That meant he had ten minutes to find Lessit's killer and clear himself!

The overloaded elevator creaked to the top. Jim pushed out with the others.

From inside the Monster he could see his tin scales were all rusty and held in place by a labyrinth of metal beams. He looked down over the edge of the landing platform and felt sick.

He looked up. Thirty feet above was a narrow catwalk leading to the Monster's head. A small platform held a motor that worked champing jaws, and a sound device that made the Monster growl.

It was dark up there, except for the Monster's dim red eyes, which were



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shielded from in back.

Near at hand was a wooden ladder.

Under cover of the confusion Jim started up the ladder. The whole tin monster groaned and swayed at every step.

A heavy gale, blowing in from the sea, made it sway back and forth.

The babble of voices dwindled, vanished. And then Jim was alone with that loud, monotonous growler.

He stepped onto the catwalk, his eyes glued to that little platform. It was empty.

A sudden fierce wind set the tin scales rattling. The catwalk shook. Jim grabbed hold of the wood railing and tried not to look down as he moved to the platform.

The roar of the growler was deafening. Ahead of him the mechanical mouth champed endlessly. Each time it opened he caught a crescent-shaped glimpse of the Dipper's snaky lights.

But it was the Monster's red eye that fascinated him. His left eye. It was a painted tin shield, with a red light bulb stuck in it. Between it and the eyelid was a ten inch space. By crouching Jim could see outside—and down.

Not fifteen feet away from the Monster's left eye was the top of that cliff's edge drop on the Big Dipper!

He gave a whistle of satisfaction. So far, so good. This was it! This was where he'd heard Lessit give that strange sigh when the bullet struck him.

And right here the murderer had stood. He'd fired from the bottom of the huge eye, downward. Jim ran his hand along the back of the eyelid.

"Powdermarks!" he said grimly.

But now the murderer was gone. He must have slid down with the crowd on the big slide and vanished into the night.

Jim bit his lip, and swore. He had to find Lessit's killer!

MINUTES slid by. Rossiter and the others would be up here soon. Jim dropped to his knees, fumbling in the reddish light for anything that might be a clue. Something to go on in tracking down Lessit's killer.

Through the hemming fogs his mind raced. "One thing's sure—the killer knew Lessit, but good! He knew he always rode the Big Dipper on Saturday night. Also he knows about me, knows I pack a rod. Probably he used the same calibre revolver, so as to pin the rap on me good!"

His fingers groped behind the growler, on the narrow unseen ledge.

"Another thing, he knows his way around this pier! He knows the roller coaster and this red-eyed monster."

Randolph Lessit had enemies, sure. Like any rich guy. But he was easy-going.

Always giving somebody a break. Who would—

All at once his fingers clutched something cold and hard. He knew what it was. It was the revolver fitted with a silencer, the gun that killed Lessit!

"He didn't want to be caught with it on him, in case Lessit talked before he died!" Jim guessed.

He was starting to climb to his feet when a noise from behind made him freeze. He turned, fast.

Above him stood a dark figure. Before Jim could move the figure's foot went out, then came down on his gun hand.

"I'll take the rod!" the figure hissed.

First Jim thought it was Rossiter, then he knew differently. That wasp-waisted form was familiar. The nasal twang tantalized his memory. It was too dark to see. All he saw was a red Satanic blur.

"You're clever, Torren," rasped the dark figure, "but not clever enough! I figured you might dodge the cops and guess how Lessit was bumped—and come up here. So I waited. I watched when you socked Parkey. I even planted that gun where you could find it. You know why?"

"No," Jim gulped honestly.

"Because I'm smart, that's why. Rossiter didn't search you. You might of had another rod. They might check the bore markings—match up the slug in Lessit with this gun. Then, when you're found below, smashed to a pulp from a three-hundred-foot drop, with this gun on you, there won't be no question about your bumping your boss. Rossiter will report that you took a nosedive while trying to escape. Get it, soldier?"

Jim got it. He tried to stumble to his feet, but just then that black fog rolled down over his mind like a last act curtain.

JIM lay there, shuddering. The killer's gloating saved him. He just stood there for a full minute, staring down at Jim with sadistic satisfaction. Then his gloved hands went out.

Through the deadly fog Jim saw him.

He wasn't at Santa Monica play-beach now. He was on another beach... Around him his buddies were dropping like flies, and that leering face above him was a Jap's puss.... It came nearer, nearer.

Jim's mind snapped back to what he'd done then. An old judo trick.

He lay limp, as though he had passed out. The killer grabbed him, was hoisting him up over the wood railing.

Then his arm circled around, caught the killer's neck. His elbow went up, then down, hard. He couldn't use that mangled hand.

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Hissing curses, the killer clawed out the gun and sent bullets blasting.

His eyes bright, Jim chased him out on that narrow catwalk. He ducked the flying death, then leaped.

With a strangled cry, the killer tried to run. Jim's arms pinned him to the railing. His slippery, eel-like body twisted away. But Jim's good hand held him back.

Once a deft blow caught Jim's chin. He tottered and grabbed at the railing.

Jim's one good hand wasn't enough. The killer pressed closer now. Punches rained down on his head. The reeling of the catwalk became the swaying of the litter he'd been carted back to the ship on, that last day. The growling of the monster was the roaring of the big guns.

Just before that black fog rolled down for good, he swung out one last punch. His broken hand. Searing agony sent him to his knees.

A flashlight's dancing beam gave him just one glimpse of the killer's leering face. Voices below were shouting. The killer clutched his shoulders. Then everything was blacked out.

It was the jouncing around he got that brought him to.

He opened his seared eyes.

"Feeling better?"

Officer Rossiter's Irish grin hung above him.

"Sure," Jim muttered, not meaning it. He glanced down at his expertly bandaged hand. "Say, what h-happened?"

"Take it easy, fellow," Rossiter commanded, gently, pushing him back against the ambulance pillows. "We got Lessit's murderer, all right. And lucky for you I got there just when I did, too!"

Jim grinned weakly. "It was him, Flabin?"

"Yeah. Mike Flabin, ex-manager of Associated Concessions. We got evidence enough to send him straight to the hot seat. But I still can't figure why—"

Jim was remembering. Remembering Lessit's odd scowl when he came out of Flabin's office, and how he frowned every time Flabin's name was mentioned.

"I can!" Jim frowned. "Flabin was probably pulling some kind of a crooked deal with the Concessions' money. Lessit found out. He accused him, but you know what a softy he was. Flabin probably begged for a little time in which to straighten the accounts up, then used that time in figuring out what he thought would be a fool-proof murder!"



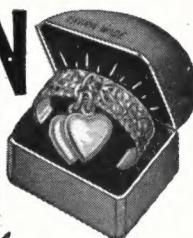
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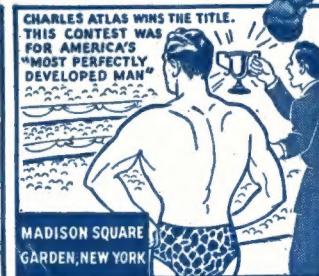
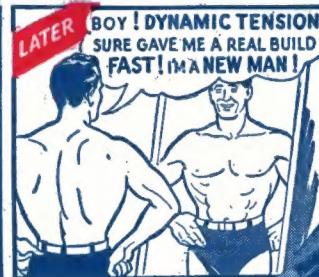
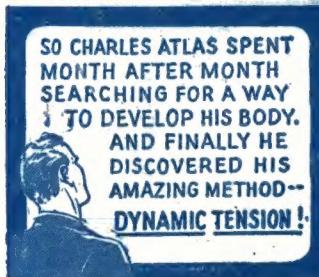
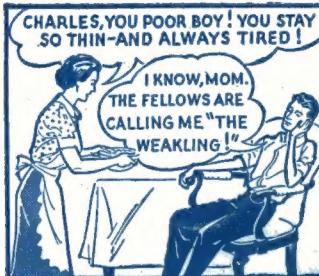
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